

THE CAVERSHAM CHRONICLES ~ BOOK ONE

*Love is what grows
when passion is shared.*

Caversham's Bride

SANDY RAVEN

Caversham's Bride

SANDY RAVEN

He wanted her.... She needed him.

After several minutes, Lia pulled away, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands. "I will please you every night. Live out my time in service to you, gladly. I will repay any expenses you incur on my behalf, if you will only rescue my brother and our nurse from my aunt's home. I will do whatever you ask of me—*anything*—for them. Please? Will you help me?"

"I will think on it," he replied, as he mentally wondered at the speed with which he could recall his crews and sail to Italy.

Large green eyes, red-rimmed and glistening with tears looked up at him and something constricted in his chest. Wisps of sable-colored hair had fallen loose from her comb, and blew into her face from the gentle breeze in the garden. He brushed it back with his fingers, his palm touching her wet cheek. She rested her face in his hand, closing her eyes.

"I haven't much time," she whispered. Backing away, she fell to her knees before him, her hands rubbing her legs nervously as she stared up at him. "What can I say, what can I do, to persuade you to help me? I would give my own life to spare his." She folded her hands

together in a praying fashion, begging him as a fresh wash of tears began to fall freely down her face. "He's just a baby. My parents loved him so."

"I haven't refused you, Lia. I said I would think on it, meaning my current plans must be altered, and arrangements made." He wiped the tears from her cheeks, and rested his hand on her face. "And I'm sure your parents loved you as much as your brother."

"They did," she whispered.

Lia took his hand and brought the palm to her lips. The simple gesture sent a raging inferno through Ren's body. The tip of her tongue traced a line between his fingers, causing his breeches to become uncomfortably tight. He groaned as she took his middle finger between her lips and gently sucked, the tip of her tongue sliding up and down the digit, making his cock harder.

Taking his hand away, he stared into her eyes. Right at that moment he decided. It was the solution to both their problems. "I know a way." His gaze lowered to her moist, full lower lip, wondering how it would feel on his.

"Anything, Your Grace," she whispered. Bringing his hand back, she kissed his palm once again, then his wrist, and then the inside of his bare forearm.

"You should hear what my dilemma is first, and understand my proposed solution."

"Anything within my power is yours."

He raised her hand, lifting her to stand before him. He gazed into her deep green eyes, and felt a hot tremor course up his arm to his chest. "I need an heir. A legitimately born son. As soon as possible."

Wide-eyed, she stared at him, obviously shocked by his words. "For that you would need a wife."

"To save your brother and your nurse, you need me and my ships."

"Your Grace, surely a man as handsome as yourself, assuming you have a little coin, can find a lady to marry in your own country."

"I don't want someone from my own country." He held her chin in his hand as he stared into her face. "I want you."

CAVERSHAM'S BRIDE

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual persons, events, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2012, Sandy Raven

ISBN: 978-1-939359-01-8

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and/or reviews.

Cover design by *The Killion Group, Inc*
www.thekilliongroupinc.com

Digital formatting by *Author E.M.S.*
www.authorems.com

Dear Reader,

Caversham's Bride was previously published for a short period of time in 2001, under the title *The Duke's Heart*. Because I loved this family I'd created so much, I always wanted to see this series completed. So as I was preparing *The Caversham Chronicles* for publication, I revised my 'Duke' extensively and realized that, in those revisions, the phrase that inspired the previous title no longer accurately fit the novel. Ren's pressing need for a bride and legal heir was still central to his motivation, and this is what inspired the new title.

I hope you enjoy the story of Ren and Lia, and that you find the siblings of both engaging enough that you'll want to read their stories. Look for the second, third, and fourth of this series coming in the next few months. And soon after that, the stories of The Next Generation, which is already underway.

I would love to hear from you! So, if you have any questions or comments, I'm online at:

www.SandyRaven.com

and on Facebook at:

www.facebook.com/SandyRavenAuthor

Sincerely,
Sandy Raven

DEDICATION

To my darling Curtis,
My Duke of Caversham (Drive)
I Belong to You

To D1 and D2,
You are my Pride and Joys

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A lot of writers work in a vacuum for most of the creative process, and I am certainly guilty of it myself. But publication is a concerted effort of many people and to these people, I owe my most sincere gratitude: Gail Shelton, my friend, my editor. I < 3U! I want to thank Kim, Abby, Megan, and Jennifer at The Killion Group, you ladies do fabulous work AND reply to 1 a.m. e-mails. But I have a question: is it too late to.... (just kidding!)

To Carolyn, Kristi, Belinda, Gail, and Vicky: my first writing friends who believed in me and encouraged me. I still love you guys.

To Janet, Marilyn, Beverly and Nita: my riding buds. Thanks for putting up with me when I hibernate in my writing cave. I wish I could clone myself so we could ride together more often.

Carol Sue, Mary Michael, Cha-Cha, you have been there for me forever. I love you.

CHAPTER ONE

Genoa, Italy, December 1818

The footsteps following her were not her imagination. Lia quickly glanced over her shoulder, but saw no one behind her as she wound her way down the narrow side street which led to her destination. The cold, light mist that had fallen all evening now became a slow, steady rain. She pulled her black woolen cloak tighter around her, but the chill she felt came more from within. Lia halted, and heard the footsteps also stop. Every nerve in her body tensed, and the baby-fine hairs sprinkling her arms stood on end. Quickening her pace, she resumed her trek toward the chemist's shop, praying she'd find help there.

Why didn't she question being sent on this errand? She should have seen for herself if Julianna was really as sick as her aunt said. She knew her cousin was plagued by painful monthly courses, but to her knowledge, no one had ever died from their monthly flux. Tonight, as she was getting ready for bed, her aunt entered her room and told her that her cousin was in need of a large vial of laudanum to help her through the week ahead. The woman then orders her to go out and get it.

Now Lia wished she had thought about the foolishness of going on such an errand alone, and at this time of night. If she had, she would have refused.

The footsteps behind her moved faster. The heavy thud of large boots on the pavement told Lia her pursuer was a man.

Picking up her skirt, she ran. Another hundred yards or so and she would reach *Signore* DelPonte's. Her aunt assured her he would still be there. If not, dear God, what would she do? She knew the chemist resided above his place of business. But, would he hear her if she pounded on his door?

A cat scurried out from a recessed doorway. Lia nimbly jumped over it and continued running. The man chasing her tripped over the animal and fell. The creature's loud screech pierced the deathly quiet, sending a flurry of curses erupting into the damp night. A cold shiver raced up her spine when she realized her pursuer continued his chase.

Her heart pounded out her every step as she rounded the corner and saw no lights in *Signore* DelPonte's shop. Lia ran past it now looking for a place, any place, to hide. Her stalker quickly closed the distance between them. Crossing the narrow street, she dashed into an alleyway, hoping to lose him.

A dead end!

Turning back to the street, she crashed into her follower, the impact knocking her to the ground. Dim moonlight revealed a brawny man, his dark-bearded and scarred face grimaced while his dirty hands reached out to grab her. With every ounce of energy she had, Lia pushed him enough to throw him off balance. She scrambled along on her hands and feet until she recovered her footing to continue her flight.

Suddenly, Lia was yanked backward, choked by her own cloak. As she reached for the clasp to release it, the man grabbed her arm and jerked it behind her. The burning pain in her shoulder brought tears to her eyes and she screamed. She screamed as loud and as long as she could—until something hard crashed down onto her head, rendering her mute for a moment. Even so, still she fought for her freedom, kicking back with her right foot, hoping to reach the man's leg or knee.

"*Che testa dura*," her gravelly-voiced attacker said. Lia screamed again, just before he hit her on the head once more. This time his blow sent her tumbling into oblivion.

Voices. One of them familiar. Lia stirred and tried to raise herself, but the intense pain throbbing in her skull prevented her. Forcing the fog from her head, she concentrated on the muted sounds she heard through the scratchy produce sack enveloping her. She lay on a cart of some kind, most likely a farmer's cart, as the hay beneath her reeked of the pungent aroma of green olives.

Nearby, a donkey brayed, and the voices drew nearer. A man and a woman. Lia sensed their presence beside the cart. Someone poked her in the ribs with a hard, pointed object. White-hot pain shot through her entire body, but she didn't move or make a sound lest they hurt her worse. Again she was jabbed, and this time she bit her lip to keep from crying out.

"So far, so good." The woman chuckled. "If she isn't dead yet, finish her off. Then take the body and toss it into the sea. Remember, weight the bag so it won't be found."

Ottavia! Her aunt's housekeeper. The despicable old woman spoke of her dead body so casually, without a bit of remorse or care. Her aunt was behind this. She should have known.

"*Sì, signora*," the male voice answered.

The cart rocked beneath Lia as the man took his seat on the bench. She heard the clink of coins as Ottavia counted them out.

"This is what we agreed to, is it not?"

"*Sì*," the man answered.

"In a few months come back for another one. *La Contessa* wants

them all out of her house.”

Blessed Virgin in heaven. The men were coming back for her brother and their old nurse, too!

“We’ll gladly take care of it for you,” said another voice. “For a price, of course.”

Another man. There were two of them. God, her head hurt. Lia had thought she might at least have a chance fighting off one kidnapper. Her odds stood far slimmer with two, but she wasn’t going to die without a fight. And now, she needed to rescue her brother and Maura as well.

The cart swayed again, as the second man climbed up on the seat. She heard the reins slap against an animal’s back and the cart jolted forward. After a few minutes, the two men began to talk. Lia listened intently.

“You know, she’s got a decent enough face, and her body ain’t none too bad either.” One of the men spat. “I’m thinking we sell her to Najjar and make ten-fold the money that old witch paid us.”

“Who is he?”

“Some Arab trader that collects women and sells them over there as slaves. If they’re virgins, they get sold straight to a harem of some sultan.”

“It’d be a shame to let *sta bellezza* go to waste as a slave. Let’s have a tumble or two while we got her.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” The first man shouted. “She’s pretty, and if she’s a virgin she goes straight to a harem.”

“So? What’s that do for us?”

The second man didn’t sound too bright, Lia thought. Even she knew what this meant. They weren’t going to kill her. She still had a chance to escape, to save Luchino and Maura.

“So? They pay double or better for a virgin!”

“How do we know she is one?”

“Just a hunch,” the first voice said. “You weren’t there when I caught her. *Sta puttanesca* fought me like a wild animal. She couldn’t have known I was out to kill her. No, she was protecting her *virtù*. I’m sure of it.”

The second man was silent a moment. “You might be right. How much would this Arab pay for one such as her?”

“Well, it’s been a while since I had unused goods to sell, but that one brought two thousand lire. I’m thinking with this one’s background and looks, she’d bring three to four thousand easy.”

Lia heard the second man whistle at the amount. How dare they consider her no more than cattle? Angry though she was, she didn’t have long to think about it. She had to figure out a way to escape before they met with this Najjar person. Her chances for success were

greater now, because the men currently holding her sounded as though they were a pair of bumbling idiots. Large, but dimwits nonetheless.

She worked the leather strap binding her wrists until it was loose enough to pull one hand free. After rubbing the life back into her hands, she tested the knot at the top of the canvas sack. This one was tighter than the other. More difficult, but not impossible. Lia squeezed a finger through the opening. Then another and another, until she hooked the rope with a finger.

She waited a moment to make sure no one paid attention to her, then pulled the ends of the rope through the top of the sack and began loosening the knot.

Lia felt the cart leave the smoother, brick-paved road of the city for the softer, rutted dirt road leading into the countryside. This was her chance to escape. As soon as they were well away from the sounds of town, she moved cautiously toward the back of the cart. Each time the cart bounced over a rut, she scooted back a little further so it would appear the sack was being jostled about.

As she expected, the rear of the cart had no rail to prevent her from falling off the back. Bracing herself for the drop to the ground, she rolled off the edge. The fall itself wasn't too bad, and she was fortunate to land on squishy mud. Still, it knocked the wind from her.

Lia waited a moment before making a move to open the sack. She wanted to be sure the cart continued traveling down the path and the two men were far enough away for her to get a head start.

Pushing her way out of the sack, she looked down the path for the cart. A sliver of moon in the sky gave her just enough light to make out the back end of the cart and its two passengers some thirty yards away. With her black dress and cloak, it would be easy for her to slip into the trees and disappear. Lia reached over to grab the sack to take with her so as not to leave a trace of where she disappeared.

Then she heard a voice cry, "She's fallen off the back, and is running for the woods!"

"Get her, you big oaf," the first man shouted. "Don't let her get away. That one's going to make us rich."

Dropping the sack, Lia ran into the heavy brush along the road. Winter-dried vines clawed at the exposed skin of her face and hands, tearing at her clothes. The thorny brush pulled at her cloak as she continued her way into the woods. Working the clasp at her neck, she let the cloak fall away, hoping to move faster without it.

A clearing ahead looked to be a farmer's pasture. She lunged forward. If she could reach it, she could lift her skirts and run.

"Minchia."

She heard the curses of the man chasing her as he, too, was

scratched by the prickly barbs. Her heart racing, Lia glanced over her shoulder. How close was he? Oh God, too close. And getting closer. She screamed, batting at the vines in her path.

“No!” she shrieked. She reached the pasture, snatched up her skirts and ran. Ran for her life.

Her hair had long ago loosened from its coil and now flowed freely down her back, making it too easy for her captor to.... Lia’s head snapped back, the burning in her scalp ripping a scream from her. She fell onto her pursuer as his beefy arms grabbed her about the waist, his other hand, still holding her hair, covered her mouth.

Struggling and kicking, she fought furiously. The heel of her boot connected with his leg, forcing a string of foul curses from his sour, stinking mouth. He released her in an attempt to readjust his grip, and she pulled away to run, only to be caught by the first man, who’d arrived with more rope and the sack she’d dropped by the road.

The stinky one, the bigger of the two, held her while the shorter one, obviously the leader, grabbed her dangling, kicking feet and tied them together. He then jerked one arm behind her back while the big smelly one attempted to keep her still as she struggled. The short guy succeeded with one arm, but when he reached forward to get her other one, Lia bit into it hard, drawing blood and more curses from him. She spat the salty filth onto the ground as the big smelly one grasped for her free hand to help his friend. Lia slammed a fist into his face. Instinctively, he reached back to punch her, but was stopped by the short one.

“*Non toccare*,” he said, clutching his wounded arm to his chest. “Don’t touch her. If you ruin her looks, we don’t get as much for her.”

He shoved Lia into his partner’s arms, then turned his fury on her. “Listen you crazy bitch, I could have thrown you in the sea like the lady asked, but I thought I’d give you a chance to live the good life in some cozy harem.”

Anger seethed from every pore in her body. “You think only of your own purse!” She spat at his dirty, toothless grin.

He slapped her. “Another word out of you and you’ll be fish food for sure,” he told her as he tied a gag in her mouth.

Wrenching her arms nearly from their sockets, he bound her hands behind her back, thrusting her chest forward. Pain ripped through her body, but Lia refused to flinch. She would not shed a tear of fear or pain in front of these men.

The giant who held her began to pant heavily onto her neck. His wet tongue moved over her skin, and Lia felt bile rise in her throat. His hands came forward to grab her breasts and squeezed. It hurt, but the pain was secondary to the revulsion boiling within her. How dare these filthy animals touch her?

“You can’t do much to fight us now, can you, *Signorina*?” One of his hands traveled down to cup her most private place. He tried to raise her skirt but it was tied down around her ankles. He tugged harder, but the first man stopped him.

“We don’t got time for that. If we hurry we can catch the Arab before he leaves Genoa. I hear he’s waiting on the tide.”

The sack came down around her head and instead of stuffing her whole body in, the smaller man tied it around her waist. “Carry *la signorina* back.”

The giant lifted her effortlessly over his shoulder. The pain in her arms was excruciating, but Lia still refused to cry out. She seethed with intense anger as his hands rubbed over her backside and stroked the back of her legs. He tried to pry between her thighs but she gave him a swift, well-placed kick, then grinned under her gag at his curses when she realized she’d hit her mark.

Satisfaction was only short-lived as he tossed her into the cart like a bag of rocks. Her head hit the back of the bench and she sank into the murky blackness that opened before her, forgetting how uncomfortable she was, forgetting the pain in her body, and even forgetting her plans of escape.

CHAPTER TWO

Tangier, Morocco, February 1819

Marcus Renfield Halden, ninth Duke of Caversham, stepped off the gangway and onto the pier just before sunset, expecting to be greeted by someone, as arranged, from Hakim's household. The crowded red-tiled roofs of terra cotta buildings and the smell of spices and leather from Tangier's port greeted Ren with the familiarity of an old friend. With his ships unloaded and secured, he forwarded his trunk to the palace and arranged for the watch on each vessel.

He scanned the crowded pier. Hundreds of dockworkers and sailors of all nationalities were transferring cargo to and from the ships docked alongside his, with more resting at anchor in the bay. Everyone seemed to have a purpose or destination. Everyone except the pathetic creature leaning lazily against a building across the wharf, his dirty white turban knocked askew. Ren didn't know why this particular vagrant stood out in the crowd, certainly this man garbed in a stained, coarse kaftan and worn-through babouches, was not his escort to the palace of Prince Hakim. His friend's servants were always impeccably groomed.

Sure that Hakim had simply forgotten him, Ren drew one last puff from his cheroot and tossed the stub into the water. He started to walk, intending to hire a cart to take him to the palace outside Tangier. He hadn't gone a quarter of a mile when he sensed someone following him. Every instinct in him told him it was the vagabond. With his hand on the pistol beneath his jacket, Ren turned to face his stalker.

The man's stooped posture indicated a life of hard work, and Ren was sure the beggar simply wanted coin or food. As the poor wretch drew closer, he noticed the filth on the other man's hands and face, and the foul odor of his body. He pulled a coin from his pocket, meaning to toss it his way once the other man was near enough.

With his head bobbing, the man began to speak in an unfamiliar tongue. There was something about the scrounger—he couldn't quite place it, so he shook off the feeling. Knowing most Arabs in this part of Morocco spoke fluent Spanish, Ren asked if he did.

His follower shook his head.

The possibility was remote, he knew, but he tried French.

Again, the hunched-over man shook his head, his turban falling to the side, threatening to come unwound. Something wasn't quite right, Ren knew, because a Muslim man's turban was always wrapped tight.

Ren held out his hand with the coin, ready to toss it, when he got a most unusual response from the man.

"I speak English, Your Grace." The miscreant stood straight, nearly as tall as he, and his laughing cocoa-brown eyes met Ren's, his brows arching. "Almost as well as you."

Ren's eyes narrowed, then he recognized the man. He was momentarily stunned, but not completely surprised, by the garb his friend was wearing. He reached out to greet Hakim in an embrace, but the noxious odor made him cringe and step back. Ren held out his hand to shake instead.

"I know," Hakim said as they shook hands. "It offends me as well. Let's go to the palace so I can bathe this stench from my person."

"What was the purpose of the disguise? A joke?"

"When I heard you came alone, I wanted to surprise you. Did your bride not make the voyage with you?"

"There is no bride," Ren said tersely. He ignored the topic and continued walking, not wanting to think about, much less talk about, his aborted engagement and his own cousin's role in the whole nefarious and villainous plot. The pain from the betrayal was still too new, the wound still too fresh. "Have you waited long?"

"I arrived just after noon prayers." The Prince fell in alongside Ren. "I take it you will tell me later why you arrived alone?"

"Maybe. We'll see if your smell at that time doesn't irritate my nostrils."

Ren and Hakim traveled another half of a mile, leaving the docks and entering the souk market area. Here they blended into the crowd of multinationals, all eager to bargain for the fine Moroccan produce and exquisite handiwork. They reached the booth of a fish vendor where a cart and donkey waited at the rear of the man's stall. Behind a curtained partition, Hakim pressed a gold coin into the vendor's hand and thanked him. The man bowed and praised him as though he recognized his prince. Ren looked at Hakim curiously. The two men climbed into the back of the donkey cart, and after it began to move, he explained, "My driver is the brother of a faithful servant. He has helped me before."

The cart proceeded slowly through the throngs of pedestrians. The trio watched as a skirmish ahead halted their progress. Hakim said something to his driver, and the man scanned the crowd for a way around the mass of people.

Then he saw her. Garbed in flowing black robes, her face covered by a sheer gray veil, a woman frantically pushed her way through dense foot traffic. As she neared their cart, Ren saw a bald hulking beast of a man plow his way through the crowd, obviously in pursuit of the veiled female.

The hunted woman lifted her gaze to Ren. A knot formed in his chest, preventing him from breathing. She possessed the richest emerald-colored eyes he'd ever seen—eyes filled with desperate fear.

Ren made a move toward her, but Hakim's hand on his arm stopped him. "It is not wise to interfere in the business of others. She is most likely a run-away slave, and must be dealt with accordingly."

"She is in need of our assistance," Ren argued, as she was captured by the giant. The woman screamed as the beast held her in a vise-like grip, dragging her away.

"'Tis our way," Hakim stressed.

Ren slumped back in the cart, unwilling to offend his good friend's hospitality by causing a scene. But the terrified look in the woman's eyes haunted him. Then he thought of a possible solution.

Vaulting from his seat, Ren pursued the bald giant and the woman he dragged with him. Somewhere in the scuffle she'd lost her head covering and veil, leaving her mahogany tresses to flow behind her. He picked up the material and continued on his mission through the crowded souk. He followed them to an empty warehouse, but neither the woman, or her captor, were in sight.

Ren pushed at the wooden door and entered the dim, cavernous room. An old man rounded a corner, leaning heavily on a cane, a look of surprise came across his face as Ren stopped directly before him.

"I am looking for a woman," Ren stated in Spanish, unsure if the man spoke English.

"Every man who comes to me is in search of a woman," the gray-bearded man replied.

Ren held up the opaque material. "She lost this."

The old Arab reached for the cloth, but Ren snatched it back. "Not until I have some answers."

"To what questions, *señor*?"

"What crime has she committed that she was so cruelly hunted down and dragged away?"

"She escaped. A woman is a valuable possession to a man such as myself."

Ren reached into his coat pocket. "How much for her?" he asked as he took out a bag of coins.

"If you wish to purchase her, you must do so tonight," the old man said. He looked over Ren's appearance before turning from him. "When there are others to bid against you." The old man ambled toward a curtained alcove, where a guard waited for him. He stopped, turned and leveled his rheumy gaze directly at Ren. "My wares draw men from the upper-most echelons of power. Men who pay the highest prices, for I have the finest selection available."

He pounded his cane twice, and a guard came forward. "Now be

gone. Return after *Isha*, our evening prayer, if you are so inclined.”

Ren stood, shocked at the old man’s curt dismissal of him, then reluctantly left the building. He found Hakim sitting in the cart, a few yards ahead, waiting.

“It was as I said, was it not?” Hakim asked.

Ren nodded, and glanced back toward the door. “I’m returning tonight. Something about her—the pleading and fear in her eyes perhaps. I cannot stand by and do nothing to help her.”

“And will you purchase the freedom of every other woman up for sale?” Hakim shook his head, holding on to the falling turban “Most start off this way, you know, not accepting of their fate. But that changes once they are safely ensconced in a *harim*. They realize what they give up is little in comparison to the luxuries they receive.”

He listened to Hakim’s words, and tried to interpret his explanations as truth, but was unable to do so. Terrified emerald eyes haunted him.

Later, as the two men crossed the enormous and ornate palace courtyard, Hakim snapped his fingers and a servant appeared from the shadows. “I hope your accommodations are satisfactory.” He ordered the man to show Ren to his rooms, then turned back to him. “After you rest, a servant will escort you to the dining hall. An old friend of mine, a physician, will join us for dinner.”

Ren nodded and followed the turbaned servant who led him to his suite. In the center of the enormous room was a massive bed, low to the ground and covered in a mountain of silk pillows in pale blues, rose and silver. Ren instructed the servant to prepare his bath. While he waited, he surveyed the room, which was easily as large as his suite at his main residence, Haldenwood, or at any of his other homes. Fine gauze curtains blew gently from the wall of arches that led to the courtyard beyond. The solitude of that private garden beckoned him.

He walked outdoors and tried to remember how long it had been since his last visit to Morocco, and this very palace. Three, four years? Surely before his father and stepmother’s death two and a half years ago, and before he ascended his title, when life was far less complicated. Spying a bench, he took a seat in the early evening shade of a large date palm. This time of year, the weather in Tangier was near perfect, though he was sure in the summer months what little shade the tree provided made an enormous difference to one seeking relief from the heat. The top of the high wall around the garden was carved stucco, intricately worked into a delicate pattern similar to the main gate and courtyard, but not quite as grand. In the center of this outdoor haven, a small fountain gurgled with the gentle sound of flowing water, creating a relaxed, almost serene atmosphere.

The sturdy bench where he sat was crafted of the finest

mahogany, and surrounded by blooming plants. The secluded corner provided a magnificent retreat for his weary soul. He hoped that remaining here a few days would revitalize him and help him exorcise the recurrent demons plaguing him of late.

The questions about his failed betrothal were inevitable, and he didn't think he could avoid answering them as easily a second time. So how was he going to mask his anger and pain from his friend? Even now, several months later, whenever he thought of it, bitter bile rose from his knotted gut. Thomas and Margaret had betrayed him in the worst possible way. Because if he was correct in his assessment of events over the past few months, his cousin attempted to kill him to gain his title and fortune. Now he had to protect himself, his family, and all he has.

Ren took a deep breath and reentered his room. The servant had finished filling the tub in the adjacent dressing room, and another had laid fresh clothes on the bed. Ren dismissed both servants and prepared himself for the evening ahead, dreading his friend's interrogation.

The opulent dining hall was devoid of guests when Ren entered. The servants were still setting out a large bowl of tajine and a platter of couscous, arranging them in the center of the low, round dining table.

Hakim soon arrived wearing a jallaba of royal purple silk with threads of silver woven through it, and a jeweled turban that befit his status as a prince of Morocco. Another man accompanied Hakim. Instead of wearing a turban, he wore a yarmulke, and his kaftan was belted at the waist. Draped around his neck were the cords that signified his status as a physician. Hakim's friend stood slightly taller than he, but was thinner in build, and also had dark brown eyes, except under thick dark brows. Ren nodded at the man, who returned a smile in earnest.

"Ren," said Hakim, "I would like you to meet Ismael Ben Sabir, Royal Physician, and very close friend. Ismael, this is Marcus Renfield Halden, ninth Duke of Caversham. He also holds many other titles, which I cannot remember, and bears wealth equivalent to, if not greater than, the King of England."

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Your Grace," said Ismael, his English spoken with a lilting Arabic accent. "I have heard a great deal about you." He bowed to Ren, then extended his hand.

"Please, I would be honored to have you call me Ren." Shaking the newcomer's hand, Ren continued, "I implore you not to believe all you've heard." He turned a devilish grin on his old friend, Hakim. "Regardless of what he's told you, Hakim is equally responsible for the

scrapes we got into when we were younger.”

“I believe your words to be true. The same occurred when we were children.”

“It is amazing, is it not,” Hakim said while inspecting his nails with bored affectation, “how the years seem to mellow one’s life and retard one’s adventures through it?”

“If this afternoon was any indication, your adventures haven’t been hindered by your age in the least,” Ren replied.

“Do you know how difficult it is for someone such as myself to leave my prison home? I long to go about among my people without being considered a threat to my brother, the sultan.” Hakim motioned for his two guests to join him at the table. “And I have two other brothers and several nephews before me in succession to the crown! Thank Allah I was born when I was. A mere hundred years ago, I would have been killed when my brother ascended his throne.”

Ren waited for the prince to be seated and sat on the cushion next to his.

Hakim bowed his head over the table and gave thanks for their dinner. “*Bismillah er-rahman er-rahim.*” He translated it for Ren’s benefit, “In the name of God, the clement and merciful.” As custom dictated, Ren waited until the prince broke bread before taking any of his own.

“Ismael and I were childhood friends,” said Hakim. “His father and his father’s father before him were also royal physicians.” Tearing off a piece of bread, he continued, “Where you and I went to Oxford, Ismael went to Cairo to study medicine. Since his return, we have resumed our friendship.”

“Hakim tells me that you have been friends since your university days,” said Ismael. “You must have had some good times together. I know Hakim to be one who enjoys life to the fullest.”

“That he does,” Ren replied laughing. “Many times a bulldog dragged us from a pub when we should have been in our scheduled tutorials.”

Later, when dinner was done, and the mint tea served, Hakim turned to Ren. “So, tell me why you did not marry? The last letter I received from you said this was to be part of a wedding trip for you and your bride. I did not think you sailed your ships any longer.”

Ren looked at the empty cup in front of him. If he was to tell his tale, he needed something more substantial than tea. He pointed to his cup. “Do you have anything stronger?”

Hakim motioned to a servant and ordered him to bring a bottle of his best port and a box of cigars. “My years in England left me with an appreciation for your custom of port and cigars after dinner. But for religious reasons, I reserve this indulgence only for special occasions.

My friend, this appears to be one such occasion.”

After dismissing the musicians, the men drank wine and lit up several of Hakim’s best Turkish cigars. In the relaxed atmosphere, Ren opened up to his old friend, and his new friend about the treachery of his own cousin.

“You know I never liked him,” Hakim said, “and told you as much when we were in school.”

Ren sighed. “We had been close childhood friends until his mother remarried and moved to Cornwall. His father, my uncle, was never the same after coming home from war and died shortly after his return. Thomas was very young when he found his father dead in his office. I know Thomas went through a difficult time adjusting to Admiral Linley as a stepfather, God knows he was a cruel man,” Ren paused to draw from his cigar, “Thomas didn’t live under the man’s roof but a few months of the year because we were at school. That is, until he quit attending his classes.” He puffed hard on the cigar until it glowed. “I don’t understand. If things were so bad, why not stay with me? I would have shared my bachelor apartment with him.”

“Perhaps he thought of you as part of the problem,” the physician said.

Hakim nodded and motioned to a servant to refill his glass. “So what did he do, exactly?”

Ren gave a sardonic chuckle. “Where do I begin?”

“Start with the affianced bride,” Hakim said. “Did you love her?”

“He had to have cared,” replied the physician, “else he’d not be in this mood.”

“Lady Margaret was a diamond for the past two seasons. Beautiful and well-connected, she would have made a fine duchess.”

“But you didn’t love her,” Hakim stated.

“What is love but an emotion to render a man weak,” Ren replied. “Lady Margaret would have been pleasant enough to create the required heirs upon, and well-educated in the duties of the station. I would have provided very well for her, and after a few years and a few children, she could have gone to the continent and taken a lover or two or whatever.”

“My friend, that is why you lost her to another. You didn’t love her, and she sensed a lifetime of drudgery, albeit a gilded type of drudgery, with you.”

“You do not understand our culture,” Ren replied, “for all that you studied in my homeland for five years.”

“And you, my friend, do not understand women,” Hakim stated, already starting to slur his words. “When you have as many as I do, you learn that to keep peace you must love each one for who she is. Never take her for granted, or compare her to another. Else jealousy

sets in and your life is miserable thereafter.”

“So,” the physician said getting back to Ren’s aborted marriage plans, “the pain you are experiencing obviously does not come from losing the bride. So it must be from losing the relationship with your cousin. Is that right?”

Ren nodded. “He and I were close as children. By the time you joined our group at school, he’d already begun his downward slide.

“When he left University prematurely, he began to live a life of debauchery and gambling.” Ren rubbed his forehead in frustration and glanced at Ismael. “It is not as though we didn’t have our fun too,” he turned to Hakim and asked, “is that not right?” Turning back to the physician, he added, “But his was excessive. He’d disappear into the bowels of Town and not surface for weeks, months even. And when he did it was to ask my father for an advance on his allowance.

“After school I began to sail with my uncle, and didn’t see Thomas for a few years. It was while I was at sea that my father and stepmother died in an accident that many said was suspicious, but there was never any proof of foul play. Their carriage went off the road into a deep ravine.” He cleared his throat, the lump growing somewhat painful with the telling of the tale. “My stepmother was carrying another child. They were both wishing for a second son.”

Ren thought back to the pain of losing his father and stepmother, it wasn’t something he wanted to ever go through again. Unlike most of his set, he actually loved his father and respected him.

“All was going fairly well until a few months ago. Thomas sent a note that he needed to speak to me. I invited him to come to Haldenwood, and asked him to stay for the holidays because I was planning to announce my betrothal over Christmas. According to his letter, I expected him to arrive on a Thursday afternoon. He didn’t appear. I thought he was just delayed, and that surely he’d come. Two days later, he’d still not arrived, and I went out on a stag hunt with a few of the local gentry. Someone shot at me as I rode through a field. I was not hit, but my horse was. I had to finish off my favorite stallion right there.

“My game-keeper immediately went to where the shot came from, and gave chase. He got a good look at the man as he rode away.”

“Tell me no,” Hakim whispered.

Now feeling a surprising lack of emotion, Ren nodded. “A few weeks later, as my grandmother was preparing for Lady Margaret’s family to descend upon Haldenwood for the holidays, we receive word that my soon-to-be-bride is very ill and unable to attend. I sent my family physician to see to her, and he returns with a most shocking tale. It seems she miscarried a child that was not mine. And what’s worse, in her fevered delirium, she called out for my cousin.”

The three men sat in silence for several long minutes, digesting the tale Ren had just relived for them. It felt good to actually speak of it all, knowing the men he told would never betray his trust. He'd not been able to speak of it so thoroughly before, because not long after the incident with Margaret, Ren had left England, without speaking of his emotions to anyone. Including his closest friend, Michael.

He inhaled deeply from his cigar, and exhaled as he spoke. "If something were to happen to me, Thomas is next in line to inherit." He raked a hand over his face to wipe away the growing emotion. Once he had that under control, he continued, "I have my grandmother, and sisters, Elise and Sarah, to think of. Now I must see to finding another suitable bride to make a duchess. She must be pleasant to look upon, and accomplished in the skills necessary to do the job."

Hakim laughed. "You sound as though you were purchasing a horse or hound. Was there no affection? I desire my wives a great deal, all six of them, as well as the thirty-two other women in my *harem*."

"Even a man of your position should have a wife he desires. Not one that 'will do,'" said the physician. "Find a woman you desire, take her to wife, then see to creating the heir. That is the order of things."

"I have to agree with him there." Hakim stated. "We are fast approaching thirty years. I've known younger men to die of natural causes." He took another long swig of his wine. "Is there no other suitable female in all of England who is still virtuous?"

"If there are, they must still be in the schoolroom," Ren replied sarcastically, exhaling a cloud of smoke. Spontaneous laughter erupted as Hakim re-filled his glass, and then Ren's, finishing off the bottle.

"I dread going through all the pretense again to find the proper wife. You know I do not do the social games well." He lifted his glass, and stared into the contents. "Yet, it seems I must again play the town dandy to find a bride. It tires and bores me." Pushing back from the table, Ren prepared to rise. "But, 'tis just one of the necessary evils a man must endure, I suppose, to continue the family line." Fed up with the topic, Ren turned to the men. "Excuse me, please. I must leave now, if I am to assist a certain green-eyed waif."

Ismael looked puzzled and Ren explained.

Afterward, the physician turned to Hakim. "You know," he said casually, "if he were Muslim he could buy his way out of his current predicament."

Hakim and Ismael exchanged foxed grins, Hakim's eyes becoming mischievously bright. "Of course! There's your solution!"

"That is not an option," Ren countered flatly.

"Your options," Hakim asserted with a flourish of his hand, "are

limitless. You are the Duke of Caversham after all. Think anyone would go against you should you legitimize a bastard born of a mistress?" Hakim took a sip of his wine, and made sure Ren understood him before continuing. "I think not, my friend."

"Impossible. There are others to consider, my responsibility to my family, my duty to my title, my heritage, and social mores."

"The Ren I know would not be concerned with the opinions of others," Hakim replied.

"I simply wish to secure the release of a woman I'm sure was illegally procured." Remembering the desperation on her face, Ren added, "If you had seen the look in her eyes you would agree." He stood to leave. "She probably has a family at home desirous of her safe return, and I would take her back. If she were one of my sisters, I would hope for the same."

Hakim and Ismael stood, intending to accompany him.

"If you come with me," Ren lectured, "there will be no such discussion again. I am only about freeing a despairing waif."

"I promise to be on my best behavior, Your Grace," the prince drawled. A servant filled a large flask with the port as Hakim instructed and handed it to him.

"You are going to have a hell of a cracked skull tomorrow." Ren tossed back the remaining contents of his glass.

"Only because I have not imbibed since your last visit."

Ren quirked an eye to Ismael for confirmation, and the physician nodded knowingly.

"Mayhap your green-eyed runaway will turn out to be a fantasy in the flesh," Hakim said, linking arms with Ismael, as the two headed from the room. "A woman to stir the loins," Hakim paused, exchanging a look with the physician, "and possibly the heart."

"Oh, I doubt that," Ren muttered, following the two from the dining hall.

CHAPTER THREE

The crush of men packed into the plain stucco building on the outskirts of the souk made the large room uncomfortably warm, humid and stuffy. A heavy cloud of smoke hugged the ceiling, and appeared as a solid mass which threatened to fall onto their heads. Ren, Ismael, and Hakim stood at the back of the room, all seats long ago taken by early-comers.

Wishing to remain anonymous, they'd changed clothing, with no outward signs to denote their positions. During the ride, Ismael and Hakim informed Ren that because of his status as a foreigner he was unable to bid. Ren then delegated Ismael to transact in his stead.

"Understand, my friend," Ismael said, "that selling concubines is an ancient custom. It existed long before you or I, and likely will forever. Most still practice the old ways. They do not take kindly to foreigners intruding and attempting to change their world, and that is how they view you.

"If it were common knowledge that you purchased a prepared concubine, only to liberate her, it would serve to stir the newly settled hostilities. Not to mention that the whoremaster, Ashraf, will have wasted his considerable knowledge educating the girl. He will feel disgraced, and he holds great power among the merchant and military classes. With little effort, he could hinder trade relations with your country."

Ren inhaled from his cheroot, exhaled, then turned to Ismael and Hakim. "That is a good thing then, because I cannot have my name connected to the purchase of a woman," he stated. "If such information should ever become public knowledge amongst the ton, it would create a tremendous scandal. I must think of the others in the family, not only myself."

His friends nodded in agreement. Ren turned back toward the curtained dais, to await the beginning of the sale. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hakim nod knowingly to Ismael.

Ren leaned back and took another drag, confident that no scandal could occur, if he kept in mind that he had a title to uphold, and a family who depended upon him to behave with honor.

And he would do just that. He would return the desperate runaway to her family once he secured her freedom.

The three men held minimal conversation as one by one Ashraf's women were brought out, relieved of their robes and turned about for inspection. Each one sold quickly. Snapped up by merchants, military officials, and other men of means establishing their harems, or adding

to them.

"Your brother's secretary and the general are together near the front," Ismael whispered to Hakim.

"I cannot let him recognize me." Hakim slid behind Ren. "I must stay out of his view, lest he tell my brother that I move among the commoners. That man has tried for years to fill my brother's head with lies, and the last thing I need is for him to tell my brother that I am looking to secure the favor of the other tribes."

"I was called to the general's *harim* a few nights ago," Ismael said, "to find another of his women beaten for failing to please him. This one was lucky, she didn't die from the beating. The last woman died before I arrived."

"Did the general kill her?" There were certain differences in their culture that still had the ability to shock Ren. The treatment of their women was one. He was amazed that the man faced no repercussion at all for beating one of the weaker sex to death.

"Likely so," replied Ismael. "He has some peculiar fetishes and likes young virgins, particularly. Disgusting man either doesn't realize, or doesn't care, that they are the ones most frightened by, and least experienced in, the practice of his habits."

Hakim said from behind Ren's left shoulder, "Don't worry, my friend. Your green-eyed beauty will not fall into his hands. We—" he looked to Ismael then back at Ren, "—will not allow it. I will be right behind you." He motioned to a corner several feet away and slid into the crowd, needing to remain incognito.

Ren and Ismael had come up with a plan where, hopefully, the woman would not have to endure the humiliation of baring herself as these others were. Once he recognized her, he'd place a bid so exorbitant that no one would dare bid against him, especially the general. Perhaps by doing so, the old man on the dais would declare her sold without forcing degradation on her.

"Have you seen her yet?" Ismael asked.

Ren shook his head, and took another long swig from the flask. *Where was she?* He shifted, trying to get a glimpse behind the curtain.

"Where the bloody hell is she?" Ren hissed several minutes later after yet another young woman stood on the dais. He wasn't sure why yet, but finding and saving that particular woman felt important for some reason. Perhaps it was her soulful, keen eyes. Because Ren got the impression she knew he understood her urgency.

He wouldn't let her down.

"Relax, my friend, there's still time," Ismael said. "The truly great selections are saved for last. That, too, is where you are more likely to find a woman of noble blood, if she is one."

Ren nodded while he contemplated his friend's words. If the girl

were a noble, there was more at stake. He would not simply be returning a peasant's daughter to her family. If she were a peer, once she returned home, she faced a lifetime of ostracism and prejudice. *But at least she would be free*, his conscience reassured.

The woman up on the podium was sold after the bidding reached the highest it had all evening. Finally Ashraf announced his personal favorite, and the final selection for the evening, Kamilah.

His focus heightened at the sound of her name. A sense of urgency washed over him and he straightened. Some disturbance erupted behind the curtain, but was quickly silenced. Then, a moment later, a eunuch led the woman out onto the dais.

His heart fell to his gut. Without seeing the one discernible feature he would recognize—those haunting green eyes—he knew without a doubt it was her, as did Hakim, who came to stand behind him once again.

Wrapped in a dark robe that dragged the ground, the young woman's head hung forward, her long dark hair prohibiting the audience a view of her face. Ren agonized for the poor thing, but there was nothing he could do lest he create a commotion. The eunuch yanked her head back, forcing a cry from her.

Ren lurched forward, intending to beat the man to a pulp, but was held back by Hakim's hand on his arm. Ashraf swung at the slave with his cane hitting him on the back, cursing angrily in Arabic. The servant left the dais and the old man stood next to the woman called Kamilah, speaking softly to her, soothing her. She settled somewhat, enough for him to back away from her. Again, she hung her head, clutching the robe tightly about her.

Ren leaned over to Ismael, instructing him to enter his bid immediately. The physician choked at the amount Ren ordered he offer.

When bidding began, Ismael voiced Ren's bid, creating an uproar in the audience. Another man countered loudly, and still another protested that they had not seen the wares. Before Ren could reply, the audience had been silenced by the old man.

Once the noise settled, Ashraf again spoke to the girl, but Ren could not hear what he said. It took several long moments before she reluctantly dropped the robe. The black material slid to the floor, pooling at her feet, and Kamilah lifted her head.

She stared at the ceiling, and Ren saw a dried trail of tears on her face. His heart clenched for her. Long, dark brown hair fell in a wavy mass over her shoulders, covering her breasts and falling to her waist. Ashraf stepped forward and gently moved the woman's hair behind her, revealing her bounteous dark-tipped breasts.

Ren felt as though he'd been kicked in the chest, forcing a breath

he hadn't realized he'd held.

She'd been driven beyond decency by the old man, and though he had intended to prevent her exposure, Ren found himself aroused by her ethereal loveliness. His palms burned with want to touch her, to feel if her skin were as satiny soft as it appeared. He wanted her, and hated himself for it.

Ashraf stepped forward and assisted the woman in turning around. Lifting her heavy curtain of hair, the old man began to speak in Arabic. Ren looked to Hakim for translation.

"Kamilah is a virgin. A true beauty, unscarred and shapely."

Turning her again to face the crowd the whoremaster added, "She is an intelligent girl, of fine breeding—but a spirited one, in need of a firm hand. She has learned the skills of pleasure well, and will make her master proud, bearing him many children."

Bidding began in earnest, fast and furious. At Ren's insistence, Ismael created a bidding war with the general that had quickly exceeded the amount paid for the last three sales combined.

Ren closed his eyes, wanting to banish her image from his memory, knowing he had to return her to her family. Instead, he envisioned his waif in a stylish, ivory silk gown with one of his mother's diamond necklaces about her throat. She turned luminous, expressive emerald eyes up to him, and smiled. The powerful vision shook him to his very core.

The bidding war had slowed as Ismael waited for further direction from him. Ashraf was near to declaring the woman sold to the general, and Ren took a close look at his opposition. The man turned a hardened expression in their direction. He had narrow slits for eyes, and a thin mustache with a short-trimmed goatee which surrounded lips that were pressed into a straight line. Determined not to let the runaway go to the likes of him, Ren signaled Ismael to continue. The physician raised his voice, and did as instructed.

The woman faced forward now but her eyes were shut. Ren thought he saw a tear escape and create a new path down her cheek. His heart wrenched for her, while his body longed to possess her.

His opponent increased his bid substantially, drawing gasps from the crowd.

"Shall I continue, Your Grace?"

"Until she is mine, Ismael." Ren had no idea how high the current bid was, nor did he care as he sat there, listening to Ismael and the general haggle over the woman. The bidding slowed again, as the military man considered his next move.

"Double the current price," Ren told Ismael, unwilling to see this beauty go to the likes of his opponent. "I need this to be over."

Ismael did as requested—eliciting gasps from the crowd that had

gathered from the street to watch the battle taking place inside. As he suspected, Ismael's opponent backed down, unable to beat Ren's offering.

With the pounding of his cane on the dais, Ashraf declared the woman sold. The old man led her behind the curtain again and Ren discreetly handed Ismael his purse. Ismael stood to go but first asked, "Is a physical exam necessary?"

Ren shook his head, not wanting to subject the woman to further humiliation, then turned to Hakim.

"So," Hakim said. "Now you have her. She is a beauty my friend."

Ren grunted, uneasy with what had just transpired.

Several minutes later, Ismael emerged from the building. The woman Kamilah, cloaked in her black robe and now veiled, followed him. Ren led Kamilah forward. As he took the woman's hand to help her into the cart, she collapsed onto him.

"I was afraid that might happen," Ismael said.

Ren lifted her easily and sat on the back of the cart cradling the woman. Hakim sat next to Ismael on the bench seat, and took the reins. Signaling for the donkey to move, the cart jerked forward and pulled away from the souk, headed back to the palace.

"I'm concerned about her Ismael. Will she live?" Ren looked at the wrapped bundle on his lap. He longed to pull the pins from her hair, to remove the veil and let her hair cascade about him, but local customs forbid it.

"I have seen this before," said the physician. "She has been drugged to make her more acquiescent."

"I'll wager that's what the disturbance was behind the curtain," Hakim muttered.

"These women are kept mildly drugged from the time of their arrival at the whoremaster's compound until the time of sale," Ismael explained. "Opium is used as a tool in a concubine's training. Once addicted, it is withheld until the woman earns more by perfecting certain—ah—lessons."

"Ashraf said this one was very defiant unless medicated. While drugged, she was more biddable, so they kept her that way. As I paid the old man, the guard laughed and said he had to give her a large dose just before she was brought out. If so, this evening will be difficult for her."

Ren looked at Ismael, concerned for his new charge.

"She is likely addicted to the opium, as most are," the physician continued, "which will make for a dangerous and frightening withdrawal process. Depending on how much opium she has been given and when, she will have to be watched closely, especially tonight to make sure she continues to breathe. Then for the next ten

days, as the drug leaves her body, she'll have nightmares, hallucinations and may even become violent. I've seen women jump from upper balconies to ease the pain of it. Should this happen, take my advice, lock her in your room and tie her to your bed until she comes out of it. It shouldn't take longer than a fortnight. Then, you can return her to her family if that is still your wish."

A short while later, their cart entered a small side gate of the palace compound and Hakim stopped the donkey before a servant. Ren alighted from the cart, carrying his bundle.

"Would you like to place her in the *harim*?" the prince asked.

Ren shook his head. "I will care for her." He didn't know why he felt the need to do it, but for some inexplicable reason, he did. "Shall I wake her at regular intervals?"

"That is not necessary as long as you make sure she breathes," the physician said. "You'll need help with her tomorrow. She will either need more opium or she will start to have fits until her body is free from the drug."

"I shall see that she has the best care," Ren replied.

Ren carried his acquisition into his room as the door opened for him on silent hinges. Another servant appeared from nowhere to turn the bed down for the woman in his arms. As he laid Kamilah down, the same servant lit more candles and gave orders for another to bring a basin of water. Ren dismissed them both once the water arrived.

After seeing to his own needs, Ren turned his attention to the woman in his bed. He knelt next to her and unpinned the veil. Behind the sheer gray scrap of fabric her skin was a translucent light olive. She had a straight nose above a sensuous mouth, and her lower lip was just a bit more full than her upper lip, giving her a natural pout. For some reason, he wanted to kiss those lips, to see if they would mold themselves to his as he awakened passion in her.

Her eyebrows were gently arched as she relaxed in slumber. He raised a hand to her hair and smoothed a strand on the pillow behind her. Her hairline came to a peak high in the center of her forehead. It intrigued him and beckoned his touch. He resisted though, for fear of waking her.

His eyes drifted down to the robe that she held clasped shut with both hands, even in her slumber. Ren knew she would rest easier without it, and moved her hands to undo the knotted belt at her waist. When that brought no response from her he began to carefully slip the material away from her. She stirred a moment, but was quickly back asleep. Once he had the covering removed he stared at her, knowing it was wrong to do so as she'd not given him permission to gaze upon her nakedness. But, heaven help him she was exquisite.

This woman had skin as smooth and flawless as his Sèvres

porcelain. Except each wrist bore angry red welts, from where she had obviously fought against bindings of some sort. He glanced down to her ankles and saw similar marks encircling them. The revulsion he felt at her treatment was hard to contain. His only consolation was in knowing it would never happen to her again. At least not while she was his responsibility.

Again she stirred, taking a deep, shaky breath, and Ren's gaze settled on her full breasts. The dark peaks had the texture of raw silk. He hated that his body was responding to an unconscious woman, beautiful though she was. Likely it came from the fact that he'd not had a woman in his bed in more months than he cared to remember. His mouth watered in anticipation of drawing one tip into it, laving it with his wetness. He could feel his erection pushing uncomfortably toward her against his breeches. Leaning over, he gathered the blankets to cover her, inhaling her musky rose perfume, and something inside of him snapped. God help him, he desired her with an intensity he'd never known before.

This was crazy. He was mad to think he could see to her care. He backed away from the bed, shoving his hair back in frustration with nervous, shaking hands. His body ached with wanting her.

He had to remember that she was someone's daughter or sister, and he must do what he knew was right. For some odd reason, perhaps having to do with this damned sense of honor he felt toward the fairer sex, that was more important than satisfying his need for her body.

His breathing and pulse quickened. He had to control his baser instincts. That was the only way he could stay the entire night with her and maintain sanity. Stepping out onto the private courtyard, he lit a cheroot and sat on the bench facing the fountain. Then a thought entered his mind. *What if?*

No. The idea was beyond mad. *Or was it?*

She could be the answer to his problem.

Could he pull off introducing a woman such as she as his wife? What of her past? How would he respond to all the questions sure to be asked? More importantly, how would she respond? The woman likely didn't speak English, or any language he did, and he spoke four fluently. Certain facts had to be corroborated in order to make for a credible story. How would they explain their meeting, courtship and marriage? And, where could a Christian marriage take place in this Islamic country?

Ren shifted on the seat as he contemplated his situation. If he followed through with this insane idea, sometime between now and their return to England, he would have to create a plausible story that wouldn't stir suspicions or cast doubts as to the legitimacy of a

potential heir. Before contriving the perfect tale, communication with Kamilah was imperative. He needed to know more—a great deal more—in order to craft a tightly-woven story even the ton could find no fault with.

He chuckled softly as he puffed at his cheroot. In a society where married women freely and openly took lovers after the requisite heir had been provided to their husbands, the thought of a trained concubine taking a place amongst polite society seemed minor to Ren. It was more important to him that a wife, or betrothed, remained faithful to her vows. The hypocrisy of it all, and the enormity of the ramifications should he be discovered, made it an irresistible challenge.

Exhausted from his long day, he ground out his cheroot and stepped back into the bedroom. He placed a hand lightly over her mouth to make sure she was still breathing. He waited until he felt the warm, moist air waft against his palm. Satisfied that she still lived, he lit another candle and brought a chair over to the bedside. He wanted to be here when she awoke, so he settled in for the long night ahead.

He smiled. The austere lady patronesses of Almack's would have apoplectic fits if they knew what he was considering.

A soft thud sounded through the chamber, stirring him. Ren opened his eyes and rubbed his stiff neck, wondering momentarily why he'd slept in the uncomfortable chair. Then he remembered.

His gaze flew to the vacant bed, and he sprang from his seat to search for his charge. He found her naked, curled in a ball on the floor, rubbing her legs.

"Here, let me help you," he said, leaning forward to lift her. "You must have fallen after I nodded off. I'm sorry...."

She turned to stare at him with wide, frightened eyes, then swung at him, the blow landing on his ear.

He sprang backward to avoid further pummeling. "Damnation woman! I'm only trying to help!" He stared at the wildly thrashing, naked creature, writhing about on the floor, who succeeded only in tangling herself further in the fallen bed covers.

Ren called for a servant to find Ismael and bring him. Whatever evil this Kamilah fought was a formidable foe. He gently, yet firmly, lifted her onto the bed, and sat next to her. At first he held her as her arms and legs flailed about. Throwing a leg over her, he straddled her, trying to prevent her from doing harm to herself or to him. His fingers twined with hers to grip her hands. The woman had incredible strength. Even for all of his height and weight, he had trouble holding her down. She both trembled and fought him at the same time, and her body perspired while her skin was cold to the touch.

She mumbled incoherently at some unknown person, in Italian, and she wasn't pleading. His Kamilah was cursing. Fluently. Her voice grew stronger and louder until she screamed at him. Her profanity reached beyond even his knowledge of her language.

Her fingernails caught the skin of both hands just above the knuckles, scratching him so deeply he bled. He brought her wrists together and held them tightly with one hand. With the other he caught her hair at the crown of her head and pulled it back to stop her struggling.

"Stop it!" Ren shouted at her above her cursing. "You'll hurt yourself."

Suddenly the thrashing and swearing stopped, and her eyes flew open. What he saw in that instant made him regret his decision to purchase the woman whose plight had touched the deepest chord in him last night. He had gone so far as to convince himself she had been forced into such a shameful position, and that he would be her rescuer—her hero come to save her honor—when in actuality she was a madwoman.

The hatred which spewed from her fiery emerald stare scalded him so that he couldn't stand to be near her, much less touch her. And to think he'd found her desirable last night. The mere thought now repulsed him.

Ismael entered the room, took a close look at her eyes, and felt her clammy skin. "It is as I described," the physician said. "Her body is withdrawing from the opium. For the next two to three days you can sit atop her and hold her down, or you can take my advice and tie her to the bed. She'll not sleep a great deal, and when she is awake, she will be as she is now. Eventually, she'll sleep from exhaustion."

Both men stared at the wild-eyed hellion that Ren held down. They could tell she knew they spoke of her as her thrashing began again in earnest. When he saw her prepare to spit at him, Ren reached for her hair again, forced her head back and stared into her eyes. He spoke to her in her own tongue, warning her, "Don't even dare."

She spat in his face.

A servant came to take over his restraint of the woman. He turned to Ismael and said, "Do what you must to save her from herself. I will go to my ship."

"It is the drug causing this behavior, you must believe me."

"I believe you. I do," he said as he raked his hands through his hair. He felt disgusted with the entire situation, and said as much to the physician. "It's just that... I thought perhaps if... if I explained to her that I would return her to her home..."

He went into the garden, unable to watch the woman's struggles and hear her cries. Ismael issued orders to the servants to have

Kamilah tied to the bed with silken ropes so she would not hurt herself further, then he joined Ren on the bench before the small fountain. The sound of the woman's screams soon subsided as the servants tending her gave her a tonic of some sort. The two men sat on the mahogany bench as sunlight crept over the walled garden.

"I want to be rid of her," Ren said. "How soon before I can take her to her home?"

"Suppose she has no home to return to? Have you thought of that?" the physician asked. "I know you think our ways barbaric, and I agree that some are. But, many times these women have nowhere to return. It may have been her father who sold her because he had too many daughters, or needed the funds for some reason."

Ren considered his friend's words. "If that is the case, I will place her somewhere, a convent perhaps. Or an asylum for the insane."

"Hakim and I discussed something last night," Ismael divulged, "and I think you should hear our solution."

Ren arched a brow with skepticism, remembering what state the three of them had been in the night before.

"Consider keeping her," Ismael stated flatly.

Ren choked back a laugh. "Impossible. I have a family to think of. I desire a wife and children one day, not an insane mistress."

"I'll not tell you tales, Ren. I consider you a new friend. She is going through the worst onset of withdrawal I've seen in a while. What you see is common, only the intensity differs. Her glazed feverish eyes, the shaking, perspiration, fighting—it's all a part of it. And the sickness will get worse before it gets better. But trust me, the drugs will be purged from her body in ten to fourteen days. She will seem a different person then."

Ren stood and paced a geometric path in the tiled floor letting Ismael's words sink in. He moved before the physician, glaring down at him. "What are you getting at? Are you saying I should keep that crazy woman? Take *her* back to England? As a mistress? As my *wife*?"

"I'm saying you should wait until she's back to normal before you decide."

"What you suggest is preposterous. I'll admit last night such thoughts may have crossed my mind." Raking his hands through his hair again, he met Ismael's eyes. "But I was wrong to think that she could.... Good God, man, you saw her. She's.... She's...."

"Your skepticism is obvious, and appropriate given the situation. But, as a physician, I assure you that what you just witnessed was her body's reaction to being deprived of a drug to which it has become accustomed. I shall have her moved to the *harim*. There are women there who know how to care for her, and she will be fed herbs to ease her pains of withdrawal."

“How can I know for certain that she will be different once she has finished with this withdrawal process? Suppose she is a candidate for Bedlam even then?” Ren saw the other man’s questioning eyes, and he clarified. “What if she really is insane? She would be beautiful to look at, but permanently insane. I cannot keep one such as that.”

“There are never any guarantees in life,” Ismael said. “All I am suggesting is that you wait fourteen days. I can assure you her true personality will have returned by then.”

Ren continued to pace, and considered Ismael words. As he saw it, he had two weeks to make a decision on what to do with the woman. He shook his head yet again at the thought of her. *Why had he done it?*

Ren could come to one conclusion: his need to feel needed. Even if only for a while. When he’d seen her yesterday afternoon, her desperation reached depths of his soul he’d thought forever locked away due to the treachery of his own cousin and the obvious infidelity of his fiancée. Then, one glimpse of her terrified eyes as she ran through the market, had been enough to spur him to save her; her undeniable beauty had been nearly enough to drive him insane with desire last night. For that reason alone, Ismael’s plan was worth considering.

He stood and looked into his now empty room, the servants having taken his charge away to the harem. He turned to Ismael. “I will wait the fortnight you say is necessary. But I cannot guarantee what my decision will be.”

“I ask no more than that,” Ismael replied.

Lia awoke with a start. She’d had the dream again. Luchino struggled to free himself from a weighted sack as it sank lower and lower into the sea.

Sitting up, she called for Maysun, a native of her country who now lived in the harem of the Prince.

“I am here, Kamilah.”

The woman was soon at her side, and wrapped her arms about her charge.

“Please call me Angelia,” she requested yet again. “It is the name my parents gave me.”

Her friend shook her head. “I thought you understood. That part of your life is over,” the dark-eyed woman replied. “You must accept this. You are no longer the girl who left Genoa.”

“I cannot. My brother still lives. I would know otherwise.” She pounded her heart with her fist as a lump formed in her throat. “I would feel it here.” Lia began to cry again and Maysun gently rocked her until the tears ended.

“You are still alive, Kamilah. You have a long, long life ahead of you, and it can be as good a life as you allow it to be.” She backed away and took Lia’s chin firmly and raised it. “Look at me,” the woman commanded. Lia obeyed, opening her sore, burning eyes. “Look all around you. See this wealth?”

Lia looked beyond the open doorway to a lush tropical garden with citrus, date, pomegranate, and fig trees of various sizes and shapes providing shade for several women seated around a large fountain. More women tended the flowering shrubs bordering their walled garden. Delicate curtains billowed in the soft breeze that came from the ocean just beyond the palace walls. Tall brass candle holders stood intermittently spaced against the stucco and tiled walls. The floors held rich, plush carpets. Her clothing was of the finest silk, some outfits being indecently sheer, but comfortable nonetheless, and she wore the softest leather sandals she had ever felt. Servants catered to her every wish, night or day, and she was never without food or drink as she had been when she first arrived in this country. Wealth? Yes it was all around her in abundance. But was that enough to compensate for the loss of her only remaining family?

“The prince is good to us,” Maysun said. “We do not hold any hope for marriage, for he already has six wives and many heirs. But he treats us well and doesn’t ask much of us. He is not perverse as some masters. He is a gentle lover and pleases us all immensely. If we are blessed, we give him another child without fear for that child’s life, for there are many in line to the throne before our children.

“There is no bickering or back-stabbing in this *harim*. We are all content with our lives.” Maysun looked toward the women in the garden. “For most of us, life here is better than what we had before.”

Lia contemplated Maysun’s words. Still, she could not resign herself to a life anywhere as long as her brother still lived. And he did. She knew it as surely as she knew she breathed when she slept. Something inside her would have told her if Luchino were dead.

Escape. It seemed her only option. The harem in which she was confined was guarded by eunuchs both within the walls and out. Lia knew she could not involve anyone else in her plans. To do so meant certain death for her accomplice as well. And, though escape would not be easy, it was better than doing nothing.

Then another thought came to mind. If it was not possible for *her* to save her brother and Maura, then perhaps the prince could.

Yes, that was it. Surely once he understood her plight, he would want to help her.

“I must speak to the prince,” Lia blurted out. “If he is as kind and generous as you say, then I will beg him to send someone after my brother and our old nurse. I will offer him anything to save my

brother's life."

"There is but one thing you have," Maysun replied, "and it already belongs to him."

Lia bit her hand, choking back a sob.

The other woman added, "I cannot say that Prince Hakim will not hear your plea. I have known him to be a fair and understanding master. Perhaps he will even help you.

"But consider this," she continued, "if your brother lives and our prince sends for him, you'll not be able to keep him with you. Regardless of our trappings, we are slaves, not free women. Your brother, too, will be a slave. You will not have access to him. The only men we are allowed to see are the prince, the royal physician, and eunuchs. And the eunuchs are only half men. Are you so selfish that you would have that done to your own brother? Simply so you can see him?"

Lia knew she would find a way to keep her brother from harm, if she could only get him away from her *Zia* Claudina and her maid, Ottavia. He was just a child. He could not care for himself yet.

Her resolve intact, she asked, "How soon can I see the prince?"

Maysun shook her head, her long dark hair falling forward. "We must wait for the prince to ask for us. We are not allowed to request his presence."

Having no other option, Lia knew she must wait. She hoped the prince would not be long in asking for her. After all, as Maysun said, she had something the prince wanted. She would gladly give it to him for her brother's life.

For Luchino, she would give anything.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two days later, Lia clipped blooms from the fragrant damask rose bushes in the garden, leaving stems long enough so she could later place them in a vase along with the rest of her cuttings. She carried the armload of flowers back into her room and laid them carefully on the round table in the corner. Maysun returned with a large crystal vase, and a servant behind her carried a pitcher of water.

"Thank you, Maysun." Lia took the container from her. "This should be perfect."

"There is someone waiting outside to see you, Kamilah." Maysun glanced toward the closed door.

"The prince?" Lia smoothed her unruly hair, then began doing the same with her kaftan.

Maysun smiled. "No, not our prince. The royal physician would like to see how you are doing."

Lia knew she had to convince the physician that she was well. Only then would the prince come to her. Perhaps even tonight. The sooner she saw him, the sooner she could ask him to send someone after her brother and Maura.

"Send him in," she replied in a calm voice that belied her real emotion.

The massive oak door opened quietly, and the royal physician entered followed by a servant. Lia recognized him as the one who tended her while she was recovering from the drug. A kind man, with gentle brown eyes and a ready smile, he always spoke in a soft voice, and appeared genuinely concerned for her well-being.

With Maysun as a translator, the physician asked Lia questions about how she felt, and if she was sleeping well at night. Lia told the man everything she thought he wanted to hear. She hid the nightmares from him, though Maysun caught this and questioned her in Italian so the doctor couldn't understand.

"You should not keep information from him," Maysun scolded.

"If I told him of the nightmares, the prince will think I am still ill and may not come to me until *he*," Lia nodded toward the physician, "feels I am well. And no one knows when, or even if, the nightmares will go away."

The interview lasted only a few more minutes, and at the end he proclaimed Kamilah to be in fine health. Ready, he said, to meet her master.

"Do you know when that will be?" Lia asked eagerly.

"He said he would come to you tomorrow," Maysun translated.

Tomorrow! Lia's heart leaped in her chest. Tomorrow she would ask him. She turned away, hiding her excitement by feigning interest in her work.

The physician turned to leave, and almost as an afterthought, turned and began to ask Maysun a few questions in Arabic. Lia continued arranging her flowers in the vase and was nearly done when the physician spoke to her in a familiar, but foreign, tongue.

"You speak English, Kamilah?" he asked, sounding surprised.

Lia smiled. "Yes, and several other languages as well." Embarrassment burned in her cheeks, unsure if intelligence in a woman was a desirable trait in this culture. "I am also learned in classic literature, maths and sciences."

"You are an educated woman?" The man seemed astonished at that fact.

Maysun excused herself from the room, leaving a servant as chaperon with Lia and the physician.

"Both my parents were scholars." Lia felt a knot form in her throat, and tears begin to burn her eyes, but she fought the weakness. Her tears were saved only for her solitude. She would not allow anyone to feel sorry for her—least of all a potential new friend. "It was the profession I wanted to follow as well."

"I, too, followed my father's footsteps," replied the physician.

Lia rearranged some of the blooms, breaking several and discarding them completely in her agitation. "Do you think the fact that I am educated will upset my master?"

"Not at all. In fact, this is wonderful. It will make your life with him much easier."

"You mean the prince will not be repulsed by me?"

"Definitely not! I believe that if your master does not want you, the prince will keep you for his own." At her questioning look, he replied in a quiet voice, "You did not know this, did you?" It wasn't really a question, more of a statement of fact.

Lia dropped the flowers on the table and lowered herself into the nearby chair. "Prince Hakim is not my master?"

He shook his head.

She dropped her face into her hands. "*Oh, Dio! Come fare ora?*" Lia whispered.

"What?" the physician asked.

"Nothing," Lia lied, and he looked at her curiously. "I said a prayer for strength."

The physician nodded.

"Who is the man I am to call master?" She had been prepared to meet the prince, and even knew what to expect of his temperament and reactions. She had spent the last few days talking with the other

women and acting the nervous virgin to learn how he might respond to a personal request.

"I am not at liberty to say," the physician said. "Though I can tell you it is not Prince Hakim."

"When can I meet this man?" For Lia, the plan stayed the same. It was the person she had to ask for help that was different now.

"Tomorrow. But you have nothing to worry about, I assure you. You are a lovely young woman, and I am certain you will charm him as you have me and all the women in the *harim*."

He walked out, and the servant followed behind. Lia could do nothing until tomorrow.

"Hold on, Luchino, *stai venento*," she whispered to her empty room. "I *am* coming!"

Lia stretched and yawned. Her eyes were still closed, but she was gloriously awake. The sounds of birds chirping and singing drifted to her on the light breeze from the garden. This spring morning signified more than just rebirth and a new beginning. Lia smiled because last night, for the first time since she'd been abducted, the nightmare had not come. In fact, she dreamed that she, Luchino, and Maura were reunited and living in a grand home with hundreds of servants. A home as enormous and grand as the *palazzo* belonging to King Ferdinand.

In her dream, she and Luchino ran through a meticulously tended garden and played hide-and-seek in a sculpted hedgerow maze. They picnicked, as they'd often done with their parents, near a lake within sight of her dream home. She heard his little-boy laugh as clearly in her dream as when her parents were still alive. This was definitely a good omen. She felt it, and believed it with all her heart.

Sitting up, she let the sheet fall as her serving woman held out a robe for her to slip into. Lia pulled her mussed hair back, wrapped it into a loose knot, then secured it with a pair of polished, thin sticks, getting it out of her way as Maysun had taught her. Another servant entered carrying her breakfast of fruit, bread, and a pot of coffee, leaving the tray on her round table. She had just taken her first bite of melon, when someone knocked at her door.

"*Entra*," she called out, her mouth full.

Maysun entered, her brown eyes glowing with happiness. "Well, my friend, it seems you will get your wish. I have received orders to ready both of us for this evening. You and I will dine with our prince and his guest."

Lia swallowed. "Who is this guest?"

"All I know is that he is an old friend of the prince."

"How old is *old*?"

"I do not know." Maysun took a seat next to her, "Since coming here, I have never seen a man other than my prince or the physician, this guest will be the first. Why do you ask?"

Lia pushed the fruit around on her plate, then separated them into sections. "Yesterday the physician revealed that another man, not the prince, purchased me, but he would say nothing more. All he said was that I would meet this man today."

"This would be the one," Maysun muttered pensively. Raising solemn brown eyes to Lia, she added. "I wish you good luck, Kamilah, but remember what I have told you. If you continue to live with the pain of the past shielding your heart, you keep the sorrow in, and the happiness out."

"Is that how you have become so content and serene here, even though you know your family yet lives?"

"It was someone in my family who did this to me," Maysun said wistfully. "I am content because I know one day they will have to atone to our God for their actions, and I live knowing that they *will* pay for what they have done."

Maysun took a deep breath and continued. "Meanwhile, I live in a palace, with Prince Hakim of Morocco as my lover. He cares for me and treats me well. The best any of my sisters could hope for is a local peasant farmer who didn't beat her. I ask you, who came out ahead?"

Lia wished she were as strong as her friend. The two women sat in silence for awhile. Then Maysun stood, holding out a hand to her. "We, my friend, have a big day ahead of us," she said, then began telling Lia of the preparations to be done before their dinner.

The two women followed a servant to the palace's enormous main courtyard. There they waited near the fountain for the prince and his guest to arrive. Lia gazed in awe at the intricate lace-like patterns carved into the stucco walls and arches. Mosaic tiling in greens, blues and black were arranged in fine geometric patterns on the floor throughout the entire courtyard.

In the center of the outdoor garden stood a massive triple-tiered marble water fountain. The large round base caught the water that cascaded over the edges of the two smaller sections above it, and the top section had a plume of water spraying upward out of its center.

"I thought the courtyard in the *harim* was the most beautiful I had ever seen," Lia said in an awed whisper. "Until now."

"When I first came here, I thought surely this was heaven," Maysun replied, "for only God would have a garden such as this."

Lia dipped her hand into the cool water, cupping some, then letting it trickle through her fingers into the immense marble basin at her feet. She heard footsteps echoing in the courtyard and suddenly

became frightened at what was about to take place. Her heart beat faster, and she took a deep, calming breath before she lifted her gaze.

When she did, she saw two men approaching. Prince Hakim was easily recognized, wearing a purple and gold kaftan with a bejeweled gold turban. Dark, handsome, and lean of build, his white teeth gleamed through his genuine smile.

The man with him was slightly taller than the prince, but much larger in build. Casually dressed, he wore European style men's clothing under a gold, sleeveless banyan, with no waistcoat or cravat. His sleeves were rolled halfway up his forearms, revealing tanned skin and a sprinkling of fine black hairs. He wore no turban, so he wasn't Muslim. Nor Arabic either, as his skin did not have the dusky tone of the Arabs. The only feature he had in common with the men of this country was the black hair.

"Lower your eyes!" Maysun hissed. "We are not to look upon the prince until he addresses us."

Lia obeyed, standing still, waiting for someone to tell her what to do. As the men drew nearer, she saw that the second man had big feet, and that his tall black boots shone to perfection, fitting his well-formed calves like a glove. Her eyes darted upward, as far as his chest, where his pristine white linen shirt parted in an unbuttoned V. She glanced at the light dusting of dark curls which sprung out from above the opening. She lowered her eyes quickly, afraid of the consequences of being caught.

The two men continued their conversation in hushed tones. In English, she noted. While she waited to be spoken to, Lia cautiously continued her examination of this man's lower body. With bowed head, she allowed her eyes to take in his buff-colored breeches which hugged massive, muscular thighs. Above that.... Lia turned away, afraid of being caught inspecting the man who was perhaps her new master.

Not until arriving at Ashraf's compound, where she began her education in the art of pleasure, had she been forced to notice this part of the male physique. She supposed it was because she had always been allowed to look a man in the eye, and hadn't been forced to spend so much time looking below his waist. She squeezed her eyes shut, forcing her mind to other, much safer topics, such as the wonderful weather and the gentle sound of the water as it cascaded down the glorious fountain.

Ren walked with Hakim across the courtyard, and noticed the two women standing on the opposite side of the fountain. One woman had her dark hair pulled up and wore a simple blue and silver tunic with no jewels. The other wore a white tunic with pantalettes and pearls, her hair falling in loose, soft curls around her waist.

Was this Kamilah?

His breath caught in his chest. She was even more lovely than he'd remembered. She turned away, pretending interest in the fountain while Hakim spoke to his woman in Arabic. Ren didn't understand all of what they said, although he heard them mention Kamilah's name several times. He used this time to re-examine her.

She was a beauty. He already knew this from the night two weeks ago. But tonight she was radiant in a tunic that skimmed over her shapely form. While her eyes were still downcast, he studied her closely. Her olive skin, lighter than he remembered, held none of the sickly ashen color she'd had before. She had a straight, delicate nose, with no upward tilt at the tip. Her lips were full and rosy, and when she brought the tip of her tongue out to moisten them, he felt a stirring in his groin.

The woman in blue spoke to Kamilah in Italian.

Lia turned when Maysun called her name. "Kamilah, I would like to introduce you to Prince Hakim Omar Makin of Morocco. My prince, this is the lady Kamilah."

Lia curtsied low to the ground before the prince, then took his outstretched hand and kissed his ring, as she'd been earlier instructed. "I am honored, your highness." The prince signaled her to rise, and she looked into his kind, smiling face.

"My royal physician tells me you speak English, Kamilah."

Lia nodded.

"This is good," the prince continued, "for I would like you to meet my good friend, His Grace, the Duke of Caversham."

She curtsied before him as well, not taking his hand because he didn't offer it. Standing erect, Lia guessed that the top of her head was as tall as the Englishman's chin, and he possessed a very broad chest.

Looking up, she gazed upon the face of the man whose lower body she had already inspected quite thoroughly. Combed straight back, his wavy black hair was wet, as if he'd just come from a bath. He had a strong jaw over a clean-shaven face, with dark brows arching inquisitively above his penetrating hot-silver gaze. Firm lips, parted sensuously above his chin.

He revealed no outward emotion as he, too, studied her face and body, his gaze finally returning to hers. This man was entirely too bold, arrogant even, and the way he looked at her caused her insides to tremble unlike anything she'd ever known before.

What was she to do now? What did this man have in mind for her? And how would this change her well-thought-out plans? One thing was certain, she would not let him stop her from rescuing her brother and their elderly nurse. She would save them. Or die trying.

Prince Hakim cleared his throat, bringing their attention back to

the two others standing next to them.

"I apologize, Majesty," Lia closed her eyes and bowed her head, "for my rude behavior to your honored guest."

"Think nothing of it." He took Maysun's arm and led the way into the dining hall. He chuckled, then spoke to Maysun in Arabic, and for once Lia wished she knew what was being said for she felt it concerned her.

The Englishman offered his arm, and she accepted it. Together, they followed behind the other couple.

"Well, Kamilah, you appear to be in better health than when we last met."

"My name is Angelia Serena Gualtierio, and I believe you are mistaken, Your Grace, for I have no memory of ever meeting you."

"Oh, but we did meet. Two weeks ago."

Lia felt another hot wave of embarrassment rise in her face, scalding her cheeks.

"How do you think I came to purchase you, Kamilah?"

She bit her tongue. The cur refused to use her given name, and continued to call her by the Arabic name Ashraf had given her. "It was explained to me that representatives are sent from those interested parties to...." She trailed off unable to continue, the subject making her uncomfortable.

"I sent no representative," he said. "I was there."

She was shocked speechless as she grasped his meaning. Lia tried to pull her hand from his arm, but he reached across and held it firmly in place. He stopped her and looked down at her, smiling.

How dare he find her humiliation amusing.

She turned her face and tried to pull away, but he held her in place with his hand over hers on his forearm. "There is much you do not know about me, Your Grace."

Glancing up to his face, she noticed his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "We shall remedy that, and discuss the future after dinner, my little waif."

He kept his hand on hers as they walked through the dining hall to their seats. The work-roughened hand moved over her sensitive skin, sending a river of warm sensations flowing through her body, collecting in the vicinity of her lower belly, causing heat to rise to her cheeks from embarrassment. This man caused her to feel and think things she hadn't experienced before.

Throughout the meal, all Ren could think of was *What was he going to do with her?* The idea of taking this woman to his bed was very appealing, though definitely something he hadn't expected to feel when he thought back to the morning after he purchased her. He remembered the words the physician had told him, and now realized

he owed the man an apology.

Ismael was right, the woman before him now was a completely different person. This was a desirable, young woman, ripe for the plucking. There was no mistaking her reaction to the palace's interior. He noticed her eyes widen in amazement at the opulent surroundings. The combination of genuine wonder, and her ability to stir his senses as no other ever had, caused him to scramble for thought, a plan, an idea of some sort to facilitate keeping her. She stirred a strange mix of possessive and sexual feelings in him that he wanted to explore.

No one had ever known her before. Call it a twist of fate, or his good fortune, but she was his now and he didn't know what to do with her. Make her a mistress, or wife?

There was no doubt he desired her, and as the evening wore on, he began to wish they'd met under different circumstance, and that she was of a suitable background. God help him if she were, because this one could easily get under his skin. His mind wandered back to the night he brought her to the palace. Though Ren had never touched her naked body that night, he remembered well her silken skin and her fragrant scent. There were so many things he'd wanted to do that night.

Tonight he could make them all come true.

But, what of your intent to free her? his conscience interjected. *To return her to her family?*

Yes, he must return her. That would be the right thing to do. Then again, suppose what Ismael said was true? Suppose she had no family to go home to?

If that was the case, he would leave the choice to her. Of course, he would do his best to convince her of the benefit of remaining with him for he had much to offer her as his wife. Certainly they could come to some arrangement. An heir for her freedom. He didn't know of a woman alive who wouldn't agree to a bargain such as what he was considering. A marriage of convenience, to beget the necessary offspring. He would set her up comfortably, and she would never want for a thing as long as she lived. After seeing to the duty of siring the heir, he could take a mistress again if necessary and they both would be satisfied.

All through dinner their hands frequently bumped when they reached into their communal serving bowl, arousing his senses. He wondered if it affected her as it did him. Sometimes she seemed impatient, other times unsettled, and once he thought her hand lingered on top of his as she replied to something Hakim said to her.

Each time she turned those dark green eyes to him, he could feel the tightening in his breeches. He recalled the vision he'd had of her that first night, at the auction, where she turned to look up at him

with that expressive emerald gaze he'd caught a glimpse of in the souk. In that vision, she'd worn an ivory gown. Other than the style of clothing, the only difference there was between that vision and this night was the necklace. Where he had envisioned her wearing his mother's diamonds, tonight she wore pearls. He had the feeling then, as he did now, of permanence and stability.

Or maybe it was just that he wanted both to such a degree that he projected it on this woman he didn't know at all, but felt an attraction to.

Finally, the dinner bowls were carried away and the entertainment began. Kamilah seemed to enjoy watching the dancers and listening to the musicians, so he stayed for two sets before he could wait no longer. There was a great deal he had to discuss with her—arrangements to be made, either to return her to her home, or not.

Hopefully not.

"I am sure you understand my wish to retire, Hakim. Kamilah and I have much to talk about. If you will excuse us, we will see you both tomorrow." He held out a hand to help Kamilah stand.

Ren watched as her gaze flew to Maysun's as though she sought help from her friend. The other woman did not understand English, but the meaning behind his outstretched hand was obvious. Hakim and Maysun put their heads together and the concubine smiled as she listened to the prince say something to her in Arabic.

Maysun looked at Kamilah. "*Buono fortuna*," she said, waving at them as they walked away.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lia's heart slammed against her breast, then dropped into her belly when the door shut with a soft thump. The Englishman didn't lock the door she noted before scanning the rest of the room. She walked to the dresser, and found her toiletries carefully arranged on it, then in the alcove where the bathing tub rested, she noticed her robe laid across the chair back. Why were they here? What was he planning?

"My things!"

"I had them moved during dinner." He smiled as he crossed the spacious expanse to the sideboard bearing several decanters and glasses.

"But why, Your Grace?"

"Because you don't belong in the harem." He poured two glasses of wine, and handed her one. She accepted it, their hands touching momentarily. His gaze met hers and held her captive. Unable to turn away, she began to tremble under his intense scrutiny and her mouth went dry. The crystal goblet shook as Lia lifted it to her lips. She took one sip, then another, to reinforce what little courage she had left, knowing she'd need every ounce to make it through this night. She knew the time had come for her to please her new master in every way he wished. She had to satisfy him enough so he would want to help her.

"Where do I belong then?" Her voice quavered, as she tried to play the coquette. Lia remembered Ashraf's words, "*the most treasured jewel in a man's harim is the woman who comes to him willingly.*" The way her heart raced in her chest made her believe this might not be so unpleasant. In fact his touch sent a thrill coursing through her entire body.

The Englishman reached out and stroked a lock of hair that had fallen over her shoulder. "So soft," he whispered. His fingers grazed the tip of her breast, and Lia's knees buckled slightly from the shock of his touch. She could not fail. Her brother and Maura's lives were at stake. Lia took another sip, then with an unladylike gulp, finished off her wine.

"Ah, little one, not so fast." He took her goblet away and set it on the table. "We have much to discuss. You'll need your wits about you." He smiled down at her, his dark silver eyes sparkling.

She backed away a step, then turned toward the dresser, unable to face him, afraid he might suspect her attraction. Her fingers trailed across the marble top as she took several more steps. At the end of the

long piece of furniture, she closed her eyes and took a deep, fortifying breath. Her skin burned. This man's touch made her entire body ache.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Call me Ren." He stepped toward her.

She retreated farther, and eyed him cautiously. He appeared to be a predator stalking his prey, and her body was what he hungered for. She wasn't afraid of the acts to come, for she'd been both educated in performing them, and prepared physically to arouse him. But she sensed an intensity in his passion, and it was this which she feared. For the Englishman did not impress her as having a single subdued bone in his body.

"That goes against convention, Your Grace, and makes me uncomfortable."

Ren hoped to quell her nerves by taking her out to the relaxing garden. He held out his arm for her. "Come, walk with me." He led her through an open doorway, into a small, private garden, lush with the citrus scent of orange and lemon blossoms, mixed with colorful large tropical flowers. Somewhere off in the distance he heard the haunting sounds of a *buzouk* and *l'oud* being played. It was a perfect setting for getting to know this woman. But first he had to put her at ease. He hoped to calm her trembling hands, and allay the skeptical and wary glances he got from her.

Perhaps it would help her to talk first, and of course they should, as it was her future that was in question. Talking also might help to temper his raging ardor. He'd done nothing but imagine this woman naked in his bed from the moment he saw her in the palace garden before dinner.

"We can speak out here Kamilah."

"If you wish me to use your Christian name, I would ask that you call me by mine as well. I am Angelia Serena, or just Lia. I am neither Arabic, nor Muslim. I am proud of my family name, and the Christian name my parents chose for me."

"Lia. It suits you." His deep voice caressed Lia's soul as he repeated her name. "Tell me about yourself, Lia."

Taking a deep breath, she decided honesty was the only way for her. "There is really only one thing to know, Your Grace. My parents died eight months ago, and my aunt tried to have me killed. The men who were supposed to kill me sold me instead. Those same men are scheduled to return to kill my brother any day now, and I must try to save him. If you will not help me, I will die trying to do it without you."

Suddenly frightened he might refuse her, Lia lifted her gaze to his, her breath caught in her chest. She forced herself to calm. From their earlier conversation at dinner, he seemed a reasonable sort, this

Englishman, and she knew the only way to reach a man like him was through rational deliberation.

After a long, uncomfortable minute he had yet to say anything in reply to her revelation.

"Does your decision to help me rest upon my performance in your bed?" she asked.

That drew a response. He lifted a brow, the shock evident in his gaze. "You speak rather plainly."

"Well, does it? I must know."

Again, no reply. She watched the muscle in his cheek jump, and his dimples pull taught. He seemed to ponder her words. "Keeping me against my will makes me a slave, and I am no man's slave. I am a gentleman's daughter, from a noble family." She kept her tone even, not wanting him to suspect her fear. "And I must save my brother and our elderly nurse."

His eyebrows rose with astonishment at her impassioned, yet firm, plea for his assistance.

"I've read about men like you," she continued. "Merchantmen. Traders. You bring European goods to Arabia, take slaves from Africa to your plantations in the Indies, and then the products of those plantations back to Europe."

"What makes you think I am like those men? And, how do you come to know so much of world affairs?"

"As I said earlier this evening, Your Grace, there is much you do not know about me."

His deep, soothing voice took a decidedly frigid tone. "Tell me everything. Where do you come from, and who is your family?"

She turned to him, her outward expression unruffled. "I told you all that was important. What should you care of the details? They'll not change the outcome for me now. The prospects for my future were forever ruined the night of my abduction."

"I need to know the whole story, so as best to decide how to proceed."

Instinct told her this man could be a formidable foe should she cross him, and right now she didn't have the time for a fight, nor did she need an adversary that could keep her from her goal. Tears threatened to rise, but stuck in her throat, suppressed by the fear that any chance she had to save Luchino and Maura would be lost if he refused her request. For her captor would then be wary of leaving her unattended.

"I know not if I can trust you," she confessed.

"You never will until you give me a chance."

"My own aunt tried to have me killed. If you cannot trust your own family, then who can you trust?"

He seemed to process what she said, his expression for the most part, unreadable. Lia felt perhaps she hit a little close to home with her words. She went on, and explained, "I used to believe trust was something that should be assumed of an individual, until such time the person in question is proved untrustworthy." Lifting her glass, she twirled the fine crystal goblet in her hands, staring down at the shards of light reflecting off the cut patterns. "That changed soon after my parents died."

He stood and walked back into the room. When he returned, he carried the decanter. "Why don't you start at the beginning?" He refilled their glasses, and reclaimed his seat on the bench, this time stretching his long legs before him.

Lia gave him a shortened version of her life up until the fire that took her parents from her. Pacing about the small courtyard, she told him of the liberal inheritance she and her brother received. She never knew she had any paternal relatives. Her father never mentioned his family to her. When she was old enough to ask, Lia's mother told her it was because her grandfather had disowned her father when they married because she was not his social equal.

Having grown up with parents who loved her and her brother dearly, Lia thought no more of it. Until the day her aunt and uncle had come to Naples after the funeral and informed her that she and her brother, Luchino, were moving to Genoa. Lia had refused, explaining to her relatives her plans to complete her studies and become a scholar like her parents. She stressed that she and Luchino had Maura, and had inherited enough money to live comfortably for the rest of their lives, provided they didn't squander it.

In the end, all of her efforts failed. At her aunt's insistence, her uncle forbade her to remain in Naples unmarried and with only their old nurse as chaperon. She and her brother were forced to leave the only home they had ever known, and move in with a family they had never met before.

Once they got to Genoa, Lia's clothing disappeared. She was given three coarse black gowns, worn through with holes in places. She was in mourning, her aunt said. Not long after, she noticed her own gowns had been altered to fit her much shorter cousin, then new drapes and carpets began to appear in the house. She didn't have to question where the funds came from for it was obvious her aunt was spending the monthly allowance that belonged to her and Luchino.

Her uncle died five months after their arrival in Genoa, and things quickly got worse. Lia felt that, while he was alive, her uncle acted as somewhat of a buffer between her and her aunt. Perhaps he felt some obligation to protect her because he was a blood relation, it was unclear to her. But, once he died there was no one to dispute, or

control her aunt.

“My brother, Luchino, was often kept locked in his room for minor infractions of our aunt’s ridiculous rules,” she said, fighting the tears. “When he was allowed out of the room, he wasn’t allowed to play, which is all a seven year old boy wants.”

She began to cry now, unable to stop herself, but she continued with her story. Lia told him how she was abducted. That the two men had been instructed to kill her, but saw an opportunity for profit instead and sold her into slavery.

She exhaled a weary sigh. “I feigned unconsciousness to discover their plans. My abductors were ordered to return for my brother and Maura in a few months. He just turned eight years old. I wasn’t there for Christmas, or for his birthday, and he probably thinks I’m dead. Maura is old and doesn’t move so easily as she did. Your Grace, I don’t know how much time I have, but I must hurry if I am to save them. If they’re still alive.”

She cried harder now, breaking into sobs and trembling violently as she released all the fears pent up inside her these past weeks. Since awakening in the harem she’d been able to keep it all within because of her plan to escape if the prince refused to help her.

Now, everything had changed. She was bound for a country even farther away, decreasing any chance of rescuing her only remaining family.

Ren understood all too well the pain Lia felt at the betrayal of her aunt, and the fear for her sibling and nurse. Betrayal by a relative was why he was here in Morocco. He stood and wrapped his arms around her, drawing her close. She felt so fragile and small as her body finally gave in to all the pressures she’d been under. He hadn’t decided yet what he’d do, but if he was to do anything at all, time was of the essence.

After several minutes, Lia pulled away, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands. “I will please you every night. Live out my time in service to you, gladly. And I will repay any expenses you incur on my behalf, if you will only rescue my brother and our nurse from my aunt’s home. I will do whatever you ask of me—*anything*—for them. Please? Will you help me?”

“I will think on it,” he replied, as he mentally wondered at the speed with which he could recall his crews and sail to Italy.

Large green eyes, red-rimmed and glistening with tears looked up at him and something constricted in his chest. Wisps of sable-colored hair had fallen loose from her comb, and blew into her face from the gentle breeze in the garden. He brushed it back with his fingers, his palm touching her wet cheek. She rested her face in his hand, closing her eyes.

"I haven't much time," she whispered. Backing away, she fell to her knees before him, her hands rubbing her legs nervously as she stared up at him. "What can I say, what can I do, to persuade you to help me? I would give my own life to spare his." She folded her hands together in a praying fashion, begging him as a fresh wash of tears began to fall freely down her face. "He's just a baby. My parents loved him so."

"I haven't refused you, Lia. I said I would think on it, meaning my current plans must be altered, and arrangements made." He wiped the tears from her cheeks, and rested his hand on her face. "And I'm sure your parents loved you as much as they did your brother."

"They did," she whispered.

Lia took his hand and brought the palm to her lips. The simple gesture sent a raging inferno through Ren's body. The tip of her tongue traced a line between his fingers, causing his breeches to become uncomfortably tight. He groaned as she took his middle finger between her lips and gently sucked, the tip of her tongue sliding up and down the digit, making his cock harder.

Taking his hand away, he stared into her eyes. Right at that moment he decided. It was the solution to both their problems. "I know a way." His gaze lowered to her moist, full lower lip, wondering how it would feel on his.

"Anything, Your Grace," she whispered. Bringing his hand back, she kissed his palm once again, then his wrist, and then the inside of his bare forearm.

"You should hear what my dilemma is first, and understand my proposed solution."

"Anything within my power is yours."

He raised her hand, lifting her to stand before him. He gazed into her deep green eyes, and felt a hot tremor course up his arm to his chest. "I need an heir. A legitimately born son. As soon as possible."

Wide-eyed, she stared at him, obviously shocked by his words. "For that you would need a wife."

"To save your brother and your nurse, you need me and my ships."

"Your Grace, surely a man as handsome as yourself, assuming you have a little coin, can find a lady to marry in your own country."

"I don't want someone from my own country." He held her chin in his hand as he stared into her face. "I want you."

"But we don't know each other," she said, then closed her eyes. "I'm Catholic and will not convert."

"You might have to in order for our son to inherit my title."

"Why? Why me?"

"I desire you." She tried to turn away, but he prevented her with

the merest increase in pressure. His thumb stroked her lower lip, then two fingers stroked her cheek. "And I think..." He moved in closer and lowered his lips to within a hairs breadth of hers, and whispered, "you do not..." He pressed them to hers momentarily to gauge her reaction. She sighed in his arms, and he added, "dislike me."

Acting on that intense desire to truly kiss her, Ren claimed her mouth finally, and after an awkward moment, she parted for him. She tasted of the wine she'd just drunk, dusky sweet and extremely rare. His tongue traveled the sharply uneven planes of her teeth, and dueled with hers.

He held her to him, his hands roaming her back from the arc of her shoulders to the curve of her well-formed bottom. She wore nothing under the pantalettes, and that knowledge stirred him even more. His hands roved forward, around to her waist and upward, covering her breasts. Full and firm, her nipples were hardened with desire, and he flicked his thumbs over each peak. When she pressed into him and wrapped her arms around his waist, his cock throbbed uncomfortably behind the placard of his breeches. He hadn't frightened her with his ardency, which was something he worried about because it had been so long for him. But she still had not agreed to his proposal, and he wanted to know. *Had to know.*

"Do you agree to my terms?" He whispered near her ear as he began to kiss a trail down the long column of her neck. She nodded, but that wasn't good enough. For some reason he needed to hear it from her lips. "Say it, Lia. Tell me you agree." She moaned as his lips reached the sensitive area where her neck met her shoulders.

"Why?"

"I want to hear you say it."

She sighed as his thumbs raked over her hardened nipples.

"Yes."

"Yes to what?"

"I will marry you." Her words came out on a whisper, as her knees buckled under her. She marveled at the sensations as her entire body awakened under his touch. Where did those words come from? Lia couldn't believe she'd just agreed to marry the man. He'd used her own body against her, to get the response he'd wanted. Even now, his hands moved on her body bringing her to life, as if until this moment she had merely existed. His firm lips worked magic on hers, and she arched into him giving him more, offering her body to him.

Starved for breath, she tried to pull away, but one hand curved about her neck, bringing her even closer. She didn't think she could get any nearer to him than she already was. His fingers raked through the hair of her nape, and traveled upward, pulling the comb free. Then his nimble fingers unclasped the choker, and dropped it onto the

dressing table. Turning away from her, he took her hand and led them to one of the two intricately-carved wooden wing chairs in the center of the room.

He lowered himself into it, and said, "Disrobe for me, Lia."

She stood between his spread knees, her thighs touching his, and stared at him, trying to decide if that was a request or a command. If she did not comply, what would he do? Her pulse began to race, and the room started to feel warmer as she contemplated her next move.

"I asked you to disrobe, Lia." In the dimly lit room, she trembled at his request. She wasn't afraid, and it wasn't particularly cool out, so she didn't understand her body's reaction to his words.

She began to move, slowly at first, taking the hem of the tunic in her hands and lifting it upward. Disrobing would be fast, as she wore nothing beneath the outfit. She removed her tunic, exposing her breasts to his gaze. She watched his expression and thought she saw the corner of his lips curve, revealing a dimple.

Lia could now see some truth in the old whoremaster's words. A willing woman could ask her man for the moon and he would attempt to give it to her. Only old Ashraf never said the power a woman held over a man would thrill her to the point it made her *want* to please him.

Once the tunic was on the floor, her hands went to the drawstring waist of the pantalettes and untied them. "Let me," he whispered before she lowered them.

Eyes lowered as instructed she felt a warm excitement in her breast. "Look at me." She did as she was told, fighting a strange desire to smile at him. His hands raked her skin as he placed two fingers into the waist of her pantalettes, his rough palms grazing over her sensitive flesh, and pulled the drawstring loose. Removing his hands, he let the silken garment fall to the ground.

Lia stood before him, naked except for the sandals on her feet. His hands reached out to touch her breasts, and she leaned into them, wanting his touch on her body. She held his gaze. His hands moved lower, coming to rest over her belly, sending rivulets of fire through her veins. One hand turned and he cupped the smooth, hairless skin of her femininity. He looked into her eyes, and she understood his question.

"I have been denuded for your pleasure, Your Grace," she said in a quivering voice, while willing her knees not to give out.

"I'd not thought to ask before now, but how old are you?"

"I am nineteen." She wondered if the fact that she were so old would repulse him.

"That is good." His fingers parted her and one slid over her nub, causing her to moan, then buckle slightly at his invasion, her hands

reached out to his shoulders to steady herself.

"Relax, Lia," he whispered, his warm breath caressing her neck. "Enjoy what you are feeling."

"I...." She couldn't speak because the clenching sensation in her womb began to spread through her entire body, sending a flood of liquid warmth flowing to her core. An aching need to be filled began and she rocked back and forth over his hand, pleasuring herself on him.

The Englishman chuckled softly, and removed his hand. "Not so fast, my sweet one, we have all night."

His hands traveled down the inside of her thighs, to her knees. Her breath came in short, shallow bursts, perplexing her. "I was taught to pleasure my master. No one told me I would find such pleasure in my master's touch."

He lifted one of her feet and placed it between his knees on the chair. "Then your instructor did you a grave disservice." His hands caressed her calf and lower, to her ankle, where he untied and removed the gold sandal she wore. When he finished, he did the same with her other leg. Once the second sandal was removed, he allowed her foot to remain between his thighs as his hands roamed upward again. His touch trailed sweet excitement and torture over the inside of her calf, knee, and inner thigh, to continue his exquisite exploration of her most private place.

"No man has ever touched you?"

"Never, Your Grace."

"Ren," he corrected.

Lia groaned his name as his fingers found her sensitive nub again and began to rub over it with a gentle touch and rhythm that caused a moan to slip from her mouth. Her eyes had long ago closed, and her breathing became ragged as she focused on the pleasure he gave her. Occasionally he would dip a finger or two into her to bring more of her wetness forth. He caused an exquisite torture she prayed would never end. Her entire body thrummed with sensations, all originating under his hand and ending when she fell headfirst into a dizzying vortex that opened up and began to pull her in. Lia moaned as the delicious sensations increased, building up inside her as she spiraled out of control.

When she thought she could take no more, he moved his fingers inside of her and his thumb continued the ministrations on her nub. His other hand cupped her bottom, steadying her as her entire body quivered, then tensed. Lia cried out his name as she shattered into thousands of pieces before collapsing onto him.

He gently slid his fingers out of her, and brought her down onto his lap then wrapped his arms about her, holding her close. That

simple act of holding her within his arms, caused her to feel safe and cherished, even if only for the time being. It was something she'd not felt in quite a while, and not something she wanted to lose. She rested her head on his shoulder, and he cradled her while she recovered her strength and breath.

Lifting her in his arms as he stood, he carried her to the turned-down bed, and laid her across it. The sheets were cool, and when he pulled away from her, the night air swept across her heated skin, chilling her. His boots hit the floor with a thud, and she watched as he shed his clothing.

When she had first seen him earlier this evening, she thought him to be a large man, but she'd underestimated his size. Surely this was the tallest, broadest-chested figure she'd ever seen. A faint sprinkling of soft black hair covered his entire body, thicker in some places than others.

With his back to her, she watched as he lowered his breeches, admiring his form while he was unaware. He was beautiful, she thought. The Englishman was truly a human form to rival that of the great sculptures of male nudes. When he turned to her, she stared at his engorged organ. The marble dildo she practiced fellatio on was nowhere near this big. Lia wondered how she was expected to take that within her body. She didn't have long to wait, because soon the bed sank under his weight, and he stretched out next to her.

Once again, he reached out a hand to lightly skim over her belly with his knuckles. They traveled upwards to cup her breast. Her body reacted to him in ways she'd never expected or had been prepared for. She watched as her own breasts seemed to stand taller when his thumb rubbed over the top. He pinned her down with an arm as he lazily leaned over her. Then his mouth came down onto her already hardened nipple, sucking it into his mouth. He laved on it softly, running his tongue over its tip, sending more rivulets of fire coursing through her.

Her body involuntarily arched up into him as she moaned. He slid over her and did the same to the other nipple. His lips and tongue trailed hot kisses upward, over her neck, and chin, to taste her mouth again.

She met his lips, wanting his kiss as much as she believed he wanted to kiss her. She opened for him and his tongue delved into her, exploring every facet of her mouth, and she reciprocated. The Englishman tasted of honey and wine, a stimulating combination that she discovered she couldn't get enough of. He trailed tender kisses over her cheek and to her ear, where he toyed with her lobe. She tucked her chin and chuckled, turning away from his touch.

"Ticklish?" When she nodded, he increased his pressure and

continued exploring.

Traveling lower, he licked his way down the valley of her breasts, over her belly, then came to a stop at the crest of her womanhood. His tender touch made her entire body tremble with barely leashed passion. Lia had an idea of what to expect, but the reality was far superior to the telling. So far she was the one receiving pleasure, she'd yet to please him.

The moment his tongue touched her most private area she cried out. His intimate kiss caused her body to jerk away from his mouth. His warm hands held her in place as his tongue continued its assault. Again, he dipped a finger into her, then two, stretching her, preparing her for what was to come.

Before long, she was once again writhing in ecstasy. "Please," she cried out.

"Wrap your legs around me," he said sliding over her. He came to rest in the cradle between her thighs, where he fit perfectly.

She did as he'd asked, and he parted her, gently pressing the head of his shaft into her. She moaned beneath him, and tilted her hips, letting him deeper within.

"There is no other way," he murmured reassuringly. "If there were, believe me, I would take it."

She nodded and he pulled out, then entered her again more forcefully, and she felt the stinging, burning sensation for only a moment. Then she exhaled, and inhaled slowly. Her new lover held still, and his kindness brought tears to her eyes. She turned away from him and wiped them. "I am sorry for my reaction. I was told the first time would be somewhat uncomfortable, but I am fine now," she said.

Kissing her temples, he whispered, "It will never hurt again. I promise."

Her lover stayed deeply embedded inside of her, stretching her, filling her. The initial burning dissipated, replaced by the wondrous sensation of being filled by a man as only God intended. He remained this way a moment to allow her body to stretch and accommodate him. She moved upward to take him in deeper, and her Englishman began to move inside her. Withdrawing partially and thrusting back in, each plunge created new sensations that brought her to another level of euphoria, far surpassing what she'd experienced earlier.

He drove into her repeatedly, each stroke reaching new depths inside her. He began to move faster and deeper still. His ragged breathing, mixed with soft words of encouragement pushed her toward the edge of that wonderful oblivion he had brought her to only minutes earlier. Lia moved with him, reaching upward to meet him, wanting an unnameable something she sensed only he could provide. She cried out for him as she felt her body coil and tighten. He gave a

final, deep thrust, causing her to shatter beneath him while he poured his seed into her depths. Only then did he collapse on top of her.

Minutes later, he rolled off and lay on his back, bringing her into the crook of his arm. She winced at the movement, but he was so tender as he cradled her head against his shoulder while she collected herself.

“Hmmm. I enjoyed that,” she whispered.

“I, too, enjoyed it, Lia,” he said. “And I shall try to always make our bed a pleasurable place for you.”

“You are unlike what I was told to expect,” she said.

“As are you.” He idly stroked her arm, then added, “I was not sure what to expect, especially after the night of the auction. Honestly, I hadn’t thought to keep you at all. Until tonight. When I entered the courtyard and saw you, I suspected you might be an interesting diversion for a few days.” She lifted up on her elbow and stared at him, a worried furrow on her brow. “After what just happened, I could never let you go.”

“You will still help me?”

“I will help you.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” She laid her cheek on his breast, and yawned.

“Ren.”

“Hmmm. Ren,” she repeated in her heavily accented English.

Before long, Ren knew she slept. He slept too, for a while, though not long. The woman beside him baffled him. Aside from her beauty, she appeared to be intelligent and an eager lover. If she was truly a gentleman’s daughter, then marrying her would present no issues.

There was her family, and if what she believed about her aunt was true. Before his own cousin attempted to kill him, he would have thought surely Lia was mistaken. What elderly woman would behave so horribly as to murder her own niece and nephew? But now....

If he was to marry her, and as of now that was his plan, he had to know the whole truth. He really didn’t want to think of her a practiced liar and scheming woman out to dupe him for his title and fortune. A man could only tolerate one of those in his life before he swore off marriage altogether.

And the sex they’d just had was so satisfying and intense, that even if she were lying, he might still keep her as mistress.

CHAPTER SIX

Lia soaked neck-deep in the hot water until it cooled and her finger tips began to resemble the sun-dried Moroccan dates she found so tasty. Still she was loath to leave the scented water for it relaxed her as only a hot bath could. She closed her eyes and thought about this man who was her “master.”

At first she considered running from this Englishman, but if he was going to help her save Luchino and Maura as he promised, then she would gladly warm his bed for as long as he desired. Last night, when she had agreed to marry him, she had been desperate and would have agreed to anything he asked of her. In the bright light of day, she couldn't believe he was serious. Did he really want to marry her?

Not knowing if Luchino and Maura were still alive terrified her. And that was what caused her tears last night. There wasn't much time left, and if she didn't at least try, she would never forgive herself.

A door behind her opened and shut softly, the footsteps muted on the carpet. She assumed the servant returned with her breakfast tray.

“This feels so good Iamar, I regret having to get out. Would you bring the tray here, and I'll eat while I enjoy this water a bit longer.” Receiving no response, she called out, “Iamar?”

Lia turned and tried to look through the carved wooden screen, but saw only black on the other side. As her gaze rose higher, she saw white, and looking to the top of the screen, she saw the Englishman, his chin resting on bare, tanned forearms. His clean-shaven face bore a rakish grin, as he watched her in her bath.

Suddenly every inch of her flesh tingled with excitement, and her hair felt as though it stood on end. She shivered at his nearness, wondering if she had truly pleased him last night. Sinking lower into the tub, she brought her knees up to her chest, and wrapped her arms about them, in an attempt to hide herself from his stormy gray eyes.

“You weren't this modest last night,” he said through his grin.

“It must have been the wine.” She felt her whole body blush. “Was there something you wanted?”

“I wish I had time to join you, but I must see to my ships. We sail tomorrow.”

Now was the time to clarify if she heard him correctly last night. “I would have a word with you, Your Grace.” Lia glanced at her robe which hung over the screen.

“Yes?” he prompted.

“I would like to get out of the water first. Can you hand me my robe, please?” She reached with one hand while still trying to cover

herself.

He took the garment and held it out for her. Lia snatched it and he returned to his resting position on top of the screen, watching her.

The Englishman didn't make a move to leave, so she said, "Please?"

"Did you need help with that?" He moved to come around the screen.

"No!"

The Englishman stopped and arched a brow as his lips broke into a wicked grin. What was he laughing at? She would question him, except she didn't want to offend him because she still needed his help. She continued in a softer tone. "No, thank you. Turn your back please?"

He complied, although Lia sensed his reluctance. She stood and quickly wrapped her hair in the towel, and the robe about her body. Once it was belted, she walked around the screen. She stared down at her bare feet, so as not to lose her composure. "I told you last night that I had a matter of grave importance that I must attend to before we leave for your country."

"You did."

Her eyes met his, a seed of hope taking root in her heart. "Was I dreaming last night," Lia said softly, her voice quivering, "or did you really say you would help me?"

She saw his eyes darken with desire. "Yes. I believe we came to an agreement."

Her eyes welled with tears. Her brother and Maura's safety were finally within reach. Her tears never fell for she wiped them away with the backs of her hands. "I promise you, Your Grace, I am not one given to tears. In truth, before my parents died I cannot remember how long it had been since I cried." She wrung her hands in the folds of the robe, pulling it tighter around her.

"Given the circumstances, tears are understandable."

"Thank you, Your Grace. For everything."

"Ren," he stated.

"What?"

"My name is Ren. I find I enjoy hearing you say it. And your thanks is premature. I haven't done anything yet."

"*Mi dispiace*," she began nervously. "I forgot. It's just that it is so unconventional, and goes against everything I have been taught."

"As of last night, you are now my betrothed, so using my Christian name in private is acceptable." He moved to sit on the edge of the bed and watched her dry her hair with a towel. The way she moved fascinated and aroused him. "You'll soon learn that I am not the least bit conventional, Lia."

The delicate Egyptian cotton robe she'd wrapped around her was now wet and virtually transparent. Ren didn't know what was more stimulating, watching her in the tub a moment ago, with the water sluicing over bare skin, or watching her stand in a damp robe that displayed the dark, hardened peaks of her nipples, and the shadows of her woman's curves to perfection.

"Conventionality was never a trait I possessed much of, either," she said.

She walked to the dressing table to get the comb, and he could just make out the shadow between the cheeks of her *derrière*. He had to get out of here before he tossed her onto the bed and took much needed relief on her—after first tasting that curving slope of her back, the bare expanse of neck, and that spot behind the sweet lobes of her ears that make her laugh.

This woman was a natural seductress. Little things, simply her mannerisms and her accent stirred him. He'd had mistresses before, and couldn't remember ever having this reaction to them. This woman was different. An innocent, she was unaware of her effect on him.

He should never have come in here. Seeing her this way made him ache with want of her body, and he didn't have time to satisfy the need. His cousins, Cully and Flynn, Captains of the other two ships sailing with his, waited for him outside. "Can you be ready to leave in the morning?"

"I can be ready in three minutes if you asked."

He looked at her curiously. "Don't you have to pack?"

"Oh, none of this is mine." She waved at the clothing cabinet and the toiletries on the dresser. "Everything, even this comb," she held it up, "I borrowed from Maysun."

Adding more to his mental list of things to do today, he nodded and turned to leave the room. Where was he going to find proper women's clothing here? He'd have to ask Hakim.

After a visit with Maysun to return the pearls and say goodbye to her friend, Lia returned to Ren's suite wanting nothing more than a nap. She closed the door to the room she shared with Ren and crossed to the low bed, where she noticed five complete sets of clothing in the Muslim style and two pairs of the softest kid slippers she'd ever felt. Next to them lay a comb, brush, looking glass, and hair ornaments. There were other niceties too, such as scented bath oils and soaps, and a fine, soft cotton robe.

She knelt down next to the bed, stroking the fine silk kaftans, tunics, and pantalettes, wondering why this man was being so kind to her. What did he expect of her to treat her this way? Well, aside from a marital vow of obedience, and an heir as soon as possible.

While in the whoremaster's compound, she was told repeatedly not to expect kindness, that affection was reserved for a select few in a man's life, and if you were so fortunate as to receive it, be thankful. That sentiment almost mirrored what she saw in the world too, though her parents were the exception. She knew many women who'd married young and had miserable lives with indifferent and uncaring husbands who's only need for them was to beget children. Their respect and affection were given to their mothers and grandmothers.

Lia spied a small open and empty leather covered traveling chest on the other side of the bed. She assumed it had been left for her, and as she packed her new things into it, she thought of her little brother. She would soon have him back with her, where he belonged.

If last night was any indication, life with Ren would not be so bad. He seemed pleasant enough. As his wife she would likely be afforded some freedoms and a secure status in society. While she'd hoped for love, she would certainly accept a loveless marriage to have her brother and Maura back. Yes, her situation had definitely turned out better than that of most women.

She must remember to show her gratitude. The only way to do that was to be the eager lover a man desires of his wife.

There was also the matter of the son he wanted her to bear. Her son. She had agreed, and would live up to her word, to bear his child. Of course, last night she would have agreed to anything for his promise to help her. If she'd learned anything from the women within the compound, it was to be agreeable and obedient. They were the ones who stayed out of trouble and lived to see another day.

She smiled to herself. Last night she discovered being an enthusiastic lover was also very helpful. Then again, it helped when her lover was as eager to please her as she was to please him.

When she was finished packing her new belongings, Lia went into the garden and sat on the wooden bench, feeling the cool evening breeze, filled with the scent of jasmine, jacaranda, roses, and lilies brushing her cheeks. She started to relax, reassured in her conclusion that she was doing the right thing.

Ren stepped silently into the private garden, loathe to disturb Lia as she reclined on the bench. Her head lay on the armrest, the curled ends of her deep brown hair trailing the tiled paving. He could tell from the slow rise and fall of her breasts pushing against the thin silk of her white kaftan that she rested peacefully. The graceful column of her throat was exposed, inviting his touch. Her legs stretched out before her on the seat, her delicate bare feet hanging over the armrest opposite her head. She made a quite fetching portrait, one that would entice even a monk into thinking sinful thoughts.

And this vision was his.

He cleared his throat. Lia sat up and turned to him, surprise evident in those emerald eyes of hers.

"I have ordered dinner to be brought to our rooms tonight. A bath is also coming."

"As you wish, Your... Ren."

He smiled, pleased that she remembered his request and corrected herself. "Were you sleeping?"

"Not really." She moved to sit, making room for him. "Just relaxing. It's the first time I have been able to since...." She broke off and took a deep breath. "In over eight months."

He took the seat next to her, and gazed over the top of the garden wall at the pinkish gray sky of early evening. She stared ahead at the same water-color-perfect sky as he, and heard the same religious call to prayer for Muslims.

When the chanting call ended, she spoke. "We haven't discussed what is to become of Luchino and Maura. Maura was originally our family's housekeeper, and after I was born she became my nurse, then my brother's as well. There was never a time she was not with our family." Lia turned to look at him, deep concern in her expression. "I know as your wife I am your property, but I ask that you not make a servant of an old woman. I wish to keep her with me as my only remaining family."

"And, I have hopes and dreams for Luchino. I will educate him as my parents did me, and when he is old enough I will send him to university, which is what my father would have wanted. He will grow up to be a fine gentleman one day, I know it."

"I will not make a servant of your nurse, Lia," he replied. "And your brother will be expected to become a gentleman."

She closed her eyes and bowed her head, hands together as if in prayer. "*Grazie. Dal profondo del mio cuore, vi ringrazio,*" she whispered, thanking him from the bottom of her heart. She looked up at him again. "I will pay for everything he needs, food, clothing, books. For Maura too, of course. She is old now, and doesn't move as quickly as she used to, but I love her as most would their grandmother."

Ren watched as she nervously rubbed her lap with the palms of her hands. This was difficult for her, and he wasn't going to force her to continue if it would upset her further. "You don't have to say anything more."

She stopped him. "I need to warn you." She glanced over at him, and stood going into the room to get a goblet and some wine. Taking a seat next him again, she said, "Claudina is my father's brother's wife. She is a most despicable woman—greedy and power hungry. If

she doesn't try to sell my brother and Maura to you, she'll try to marry you off to her daughter, Julianna, if she even suspects you have any wealth."

Ren laughed, but her eyes widened suddenly in fright.

"Please be careful around her. Promise me."

He assured her, "I will." Without saying so to Lia, he knew that some old woman could never best him.

A male servant came to the doorway of the courtyard to announce that the bath had been prepared, and their dinner tray was in the room.

"Shall I stay and attend you in your bath, Your Grace?" the servant asked.

"No, the lady will attend me." He met her green-eyed gaze, and nodded, letting her know that it was what he wanted.

"As you wish." The servant bowed and left.

Ren stood, and holding out a hand to Lia, he led her into the room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

To allow him privacy as he undressed, Lia busied herself by testing the water to make sure it was warm enough. She then placed a towel over the privacy screen and the bar of soap on the floor next to the tub. When he joined her behind the screen, she forced herself to keep her eyes downcast, unsure of how he would react to her direct gaze, when what she really wanted was to admire his naked beauty.

With his back to her, he lowered his massive frame into the brass tub, and she got a glimpse of his naked bottom as he sank into the warm water. His skin was tanned golden from the sun, down to the point of his breeches, below which his skin was whiter than hers. Surely he must work on that ship without a shirt, like a common laborer, to be tanned so evenly, she thought. The muscles of his shoulders visibly relaxed as he lay his head back against the curved headrest of the brass hip bath. His entire body could not fit into the tub, so a great long portion of his legs rose above the water. Water spilled over onto the tile and she immediately reached for one of the towels, laying it on the floor so he wouldn't slip when he came out.

"The tub seemed large enough for two when I bathed earlier." She dampened the washcloth. Picking up the bar of soap, she nervously worked a lather onto the cloth and began scrubbing his back. Lia had never tended a man in his bath before, and to have this one as her first had her on edge. She had to control her racing heart and shaky hands. His was the finest specimen of male to ever catch her eye. And she'd seen most all of the great statues in her travels with her parents.

"I've had this problem all my adult life." He sighed. "When we get to my home, Haldenwood, you will see my solution to small bathing tubs."

Lia washed his neck and moved to the side of the tub so she could work on his chest. When she finished scrubbing that part of his anatomy, she added more lather to the cloth and started on his arms. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she perhaps scrubbed overlong on his back as it gave her an excuse to touch his hard-muscled body. Finished with his arms, she reached for one of his legs. Taking his foot, she hoped he didn't notice the tremors in her hand as she scrubbed up his leg. Her breath hitched when she stopped at mid-thigh, right where his leg met water. She set it down gently, and lifted the other to repeat the task. Her hands shook as she took the pitcher from the stand and dipped it in the tub. She poured the water over his head, rinsing him off. Reaching for the soap once more, she began to

lather his hair. Her fingers gently massaged his scalp and she loved the soft feel of his shaggy waves.

Once his head was rinsed, she reached for the soap again. Eyes still averted from his body, and fire burning in her face from the task still at hand, she said softly, "If you will stand, I shall see to the rest of you."

"Hand me the soap and I'll finish." His voice sounded strangely tense.

"Did I not do a satisfactory job?" Lia finally lifted her eyes to meet his. She didn't want to displease him.

"If I allow you to tend that part of me, you're likely to end up in here with me. And, as you said earlier, this tub is not made for the two of us."

She handed Ren the soap. As she did, she could have sworn he was smiling. The cur found her embarrassment amusing. "I was merely focused on the task. The intent wasn't to arouse you."

"Why don't you pour us some wine. I'll be out shortly."

Lia quickly disappeared into the bedroom. She walked to the round table where the decanter of wine sat with their dinner tray. Pouring two glasses, she immediately took several gulps from hers for reinforcement. She needed to maintain a calm demeanor. She didn't want to do or say anything that would jeopardize his promise of help. As she refilled her glass, Ren entered wearing his robe.

"You did a very good job, Lia. An excellent job. I forgot that despite all your instruction, you are still a novice. You're bound to get nervous at tending a man in his bath." He reached for the glass of wine on the table and sat in the wing chair next to it. "Once we become more familiar with each other, it will get easier."

She wanted to tell him that nerves were the least of the emotions she felt while tending him. Removing the cover from the dinner tray, she sat in the opposite chair and waited for him to begin eating.

He pulled the bowl closer to him and scooted the chair back, away from the table. "Come, Lia, I would have you sit on my lap."

Her gaze flew to his, but she read nothing in his deep silver eyes. On trembling legs she stopped just beyond his reach. His stubbly cheeks crinkled into a dimpled smile which made her heart race. She swallowed the rising nervousness as she came closer. He took her hand and gently tugged her onto his lap. Lia held herself erect, so as not to interfere with his hands while he moved dishes on the table. He pulled the flat round bread apart, took a piece and dunked it in the bowl of meaty lamb stew. Lia watched as his sensuous mouth parted and he bit from it, then offered the rest to her. Peering deeply into his eyes, she parted her lips and took a small bite. She gave him a little grin when she was done.

Ren did the same with the lamb. He took a piece from the bowl with his fingers, and fed her the other half of it. Aroused by the air of erotic sensations surrounding them and the sharing of one meal, she took two of his fingers into her mouth and licked the sauce from them, her tongue reaching between the two and lapping it clean. Emboldened by the mood, she took a small chunk of vegetable from the bowl and placed it to his lips. When he took it between his teeth, he did the same to her, capturing her hand in his and sucking her two fingers into his mouth. Not only did he lick the sauce from her fingers, his tongue began to flick over the hypersensitive skin at the juncture.

It was her undoing. Reluctant to give up this sensation, she removed her fingers and leaned over and kissed him, asking without words for him to give her more. His firm lips moved expertly over hers as his hands roamed over her back. Lia opened for him. Their tongues dueled for long minutes, leaving her breathless when he broke away.

He took another sip of his wine and held his glass out for her to drink. Mesmerized by his penetrating silver gaze, she placed her mouth on the glass and drank. He set the goblet down and she kissed him again. Intoxicated with desire, she wanted to taste more. She moved from his lips to the stubbly skin of his cheek, then back to the satiny-soft skin of his earlobe. Though she had been trained to please him, she was the one being pleased. He made her feel desired.

Lower she went, to his neck where she inhaled the spicy orange scent of the soap she'd just used on him. Intent only on his satisfaction, she made a bold move, not knowing how he would react, and parted the robe he wore. He growled into her hair as her hands roamed lower, to his chest, where she felt the hardened peaks of his nipples under the sensitive skin of her fingers. His shaft was hard now too, and it pressed into the back of her thighs.

Thinking he might be uncomfortable with her weight on him, Lia shifted off of his lap and knelt on the floor between his knees. She wanted to do for him what he'd done for her the night before and unbelted his robe. She ran her fingers across his downy-haired chest, letting the tips tease his nipples more. Leaning into him she inhaled his scent, the spicy soap and sunshine smell of him aroused her.

Then she felt his hands at her elbows, lifting her. "Remove your clothing Lia," he said.

Standing, and with shaky hands, she untied the drawstring of her pantalettes and let them slip soundlessly to the floor. She turned her back to him and did the same with the ties on her kaftan, and it slid down her back to pool at her feet. Moving her hair over one shoulder, she turned to face him.

His eyes burned her with his gaze as she returned to the space

between his spread legs. She reached forward, touched his bare chest and let her fingers rove lower, parting his robe completely. His magnificent shaft stood up before her and begged for her touch. She knelt before him and lightly touched his tip with a finger. Lia looked into Ren's eyes as she placed that finger to her lips and licked the drop from it.

The smooth, silky texture of his skin was warm, and he had a flavor, unlike the marble dildo, a salty-sweet combination that wasn't unpleasant at all. One of the women in the compound frightened her with her tales of learning fellatio on her lover. She had described a horrible explosion of fluid into her mouth that caused her to retch. This, what she was experiencing with Ren, was nothing to be frightened of, she decided, as she put her lips around the head and began to lave him with her tongue. The power she felt, knowing she could arouse him in this fashion was intoxicating. Focusing on the pleasure points as she was instructed, Lia caressed him just under the head, using her hand and mouth simultaneously. She firmly, yet gently, stroked the ridge on the underside of his shaft, then lowered her head onto him fully taking him all the way into her mouth. Over and over she did this, until he made a growling noise and she raised herself.

"Did I hurt you?" He appeared to struggle to control his breathing. "Are you well?" When he nodded, she relaxed and sipped from her wine goblet, and asked, "Shall I continue?"

He nodded again. Lia took her glass of wine, and trickled a few drops onto him, then lightly licked it all away. His low growl told her how much he enjoyed it. She moved up and down his shaft, lubricating him with her tongue as she did so. His slick, smooth skin moved easily between her lips. He groaned as she drew him deeply into her mouth, only to bring him out and do the same again.

She watched his face as she licked over the salty-sweet drops that came to his tip. His eyes fluttered open and met hers, only to clench tightly shut when she took him into her mouth again. When she swirled her tongue around his tip, his mouth dropped open and he growled like an animal. He ran his fingers through her hair and held her head firmly in place as he began to move with her.

Suddenly he pulled her head away. "I need to be inside you." His gravelly voice spoke of his urgency. Ren hurriedly guided her down onto the floor, and knelt between her legs. Holding her bent knees in the crook of his arms, he lifted her and thrust into her with a force so different from the tenderness shown her last night. Lia cried out at his deep entry, but needing him with an equal intensity she raised her hands to his head and brought his lips to hers and kissed him. He thrust into her repeatedly, her urgency built and her inner muscles

began to clench. Tighter and tighter until they reached a climax moments apart.

To avoid collapsing on her, he rolled them over on the rug and held her on top, stroking her back tenderly. Tears of completion and exhaustion welled up in her eyes and trickled into her hair. As she raised herself from him, he noticed. "I'm sorry, Lia. I shouldn't have treated you so roughly, but I..."

Her entire body felt like a lump of dough. She had no energy to move so she remained listless on the carpeted floor. She turned her head, and gave her lover a satisfied smile, wanting to assure him that he'd not hurt her. Yawning, she said, "*Non scusarti per sentirsi passione.*"

It was the motto she lived by, and she wanted him to know it before she fell asleep. *Never apologize for feeling passion.*

When she woke minutes later, it was to find her lover standing over her in the dim room lit only by a candle. He stared down at her as she sat up, stretching the aching muscles of her back. Bending low, he lifted her naked body and placed her in the center of the bed, then climbed in next to her. It didn't take her long to fall back asleep, especially with Ren next to her, protecting her.

Hours later, he nuzzled her neck and whispered, "I need you again." He wanted her with an intensity that hurt. His cock throbbed almost as painfully as it did the night before.

He moved between her legs, and watched a sleepy smile cross her face. God she was beautiful, and his need for her didn't scare her. He pushed aside the hair from her face and began to kiss her. Starting with her lips—the same lips that drove him wild just hours earlier. She tasted of sleep and sweet wine, and he lingered on them for long, slow minutes before moving down the curve of her jaw to her satiny-smooth neck.

Ren fondled her breasts, lightly squeezing each nipple. The dusky tips stiffened in response, and he took one into his mouth and began to suckle her. His tongue played over the one tip while his thumb and forefinger gently prepared the other. He moved over her to suckle that hardened peak, allowing his hands to rove lower, over her flat abdomen and into the smooth lips covering her center. He probed, hunting for and finding her core. Her moans spurred him on, and his body wanted hers more than he'd ever wanted a woman before, in ways he never wanted a woman before. It felt almost combustible this connection he had with her.

His mouth broke free from her breast and as one hand continued fondling her wetness, he reached for the glass of wine he'd left on the bedside table. He took a sip, then poured a few drops between her breasts and watched them roll down to her belly where he licked them

off. "You taste good." He met her gaze and sat back on his heels, contemplating which part he wanted to taste next. His gaze slid down to her smooth mound, and back to her smoky emerald eyes. Seeing no resistance, he smiled before trailing a finger down from her navel, where it slid between her moist lips. She was wet and ready for him again, and the knowledge made him bolder. Ren tilted the glass, pouring a tiny bit more over her swollen core, and licked her until all traces were gone. Her moans and whispered encouragements told him she enjoyed his efforts. When he'd run out of wine, he set the goblet on the floor, and came back to her to continue loving her with his tongue.

Ren placed a finger, then two inside her slick passage, and felt her tightness pull them in. He moved his fingers in her while his tongue worked on her core. Before long she writhed beneath him, begging him to fill her. He lay on the bed next to her and pulled her over onto him. She spread herself for his entry. Then she slowly lowered her body onto him.

"You're so sweet, my Lia."

Once she was completely impaled, he began to move, rocking her with his rhythm. His fingers continued to stroke her nub as he loved her slowly.

In a matter of minutes she picked up the pace, eager for release. He urged her down and rolled her over. Moving slowly, in and out, he brought them both to the edge of ecstasy. Her sheath rhythmically clenched tight around him, pulling him in deeper, and he gave her what she wanted. Fulfillment.

She cried out his name and Ren climaxed again with Lia still trembling in his arms. After he recovered his senses, he rolled off her, drawing her close. This time he cuddled her in the crook of his arm as they both fell asleep.

The last thought he had before he slept again was where, and how quickly, they could marry.

Five days later, right at sunrise, Lia wrapped Ren's coat tighter about her and stepped up to the wheel deck to meet him. He'd left the room just minutes before she climbed out of the bed, unable to sleep. She dressed, put his coat on, and went above, after stopping in the galley to get two mugs of the horrible brew his cook called coffee.

"Good morning, Your Grace," she offered, her mood growing more tense the closer they got to Genoa.

He nodded, "Good morning to you, too."

Lia handed Ren a mug and stood next to him as he maneuvered his lead ship, *Warlock* near a land mass, with *Sorceress* and *Sea Witch* close behind. The faint winds were growing colder the closer to Italy

they got. Looking up, she saw the sails luffing as they struggled to catch the breeze.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“We have been running parallel to Sardinia all night.” He pointed ahead and to the east. “We’re almost to Corsica.”

The sun hung low in the east over the island, and stray wisps escaped the braid and blew about her face as she squinted toward their destination.

“How soon will we be in Genoa?”

“If the wind doesn’t pick up, two more days. A day and a half if we get lucky.”

Lia turned her face heavenward, closed her eyes. She said a prayer for good weather, more wind, and that they were not too late. She exhaled, relaxing somewhat, and turned back to Ren. “We must come up with a plan to take them from my aunt’s home.”

Their gazes met, his dark, silver eyes warming her inside. “We can do that when we get to Genoa and I send men out to do some reconnaissance. But before I do that, I’ll need some information.”

“Such as?”

“I need to know where I am going and who is likely to be there.” Ren nodded at the bearded man standing nearby, and handed the wheel to him. He led Lia down to the bow railing. “What reception will I receive were I to simply knock on the door and demand their release?”

“We will not be welcome.” Lia pushed the hair from her eyes and took a deep, shaky breath. “I fear she may try to keep Luchino from me.”

“Why? Why would the woman wish to have two more mouths to feed? If money is so tight that she robs you of your inheritance, she should be relieved to have them gone.”

Lia stared at Ren, and knew now was the time to tell him the rest of the story. “She did not get the inheritance for that sits in a trust. My brother and I each receive our portion at the age of twenty-one. Until then we receive a monthly allowance. The guardian of the trust is a man hired by my grandfather before his death, and my uncle was unable to remove him from the trust after he moved us to his home.”

He appeared confused, as his silver eyes bore into hers. “Have I done, or said something upsetting, Your Grace?”

“Who was your uncle?” His voice was tense as he clipped the words.

“My father’s brother was the Conte di Loretto. The man was a poor gambler who lost his half of the family fortune. His wife and children lived beyond their means for many years. Upon my uncle’s death, my cousin Ugo, who is as mean as his mother, inherited the

title. And right now that makes my brother, Luchino, the heir to that fortune-less title. Except Luchino and I have a generous inheritance waiting for us.” Lia felt a fearful tremor rise within her. “With my brother and I out of the way, my *Zia* inherits it all.”

Lia had a difficult time trying to read his expression. He seemed pensive, yet his tightly-drawn lips indicated a measure of anger, and she couldn’t understand why. She held onto the rail as a wave rocked the ship. Turning to stare into the horizon, she continued. “My father was a second son who rejected his family as they rejected him when he married my mother. Some time after their marriage, my grandfather tried to make amends to my father, perhaps after realizing what a sad, drunken gambler my uncle was. He left my father an inheritance which Papa wanted no part of, so it sat in a bank in Genoa for many years. Maura said she was certain mama never knew of it.”

Lia sighed, wishing she could relive those events again and struggle harder against leaving Naples. “After my parents died, we suddenly had these relatives we didn’t know forcing us to leave our comfortable home and simple life, to move in with them. My mind still reels at the thought of how quickly they found us.

“My aunt wants the money, I know this. She would inherit it if we were gone. She arranged to have me killed, and it is only by the grace of God that I am here. I fear she will do the same to Luchino and Maura.”

Lia looked up at Ren. His lips were drawn tight, and his eyes darkened to near black as he stared down at her.

“I will need the name of the guardian and the bank when we get to Genoa.”

Lia nodded. She thought back to the day her aunt walked into their modest cottage, with her silk kerchief covering her nose and mouth, as though their home reeked. Lia had hated her from the moment their eyes met. “Please, I beg of you, be careful. She is a deceitful, uncaring and cruel woman. Someone with no regard for human life, not even her own blood relations.” In truth, the mere thought of the woman repulsed her. She wished she’d never set eyes on her all those months ago. How different her life would have been.

Lia chattered on nervously. “My father never used his familial ties to his advantage. He rejected the inheritance and his family. I never knew it existed. My parents were simple people. Academics. Scholars. From them, I learned to love books. Father taught me maths, science and politics. Father said I have the gift of an ear for languages, and I speak and read six fluently. I inherited my mother’s love of literature and poetry.”

She wondered if she should reveal her weaknesses to him, and decided it could hurt nothing, as he already seemed upset by her

situation. "And yet, I am an embarrassment to my culture. I cannot draw or paint. I sing horribly, and play not one musical instrument."

Lia turned to look into Ren's eyes. His expression softened some, but only slightly. She rambled on nervously. "You will like my brother. He is intelligent and polite. I will keep him in line, and he will never be a bother. I promise."

Ren led her by the elbow down to his cabin. "We will have your brother in a few days." He sounded exasperated as he lifted a rolled chart from a container next to the bookcase. "Now, I have work to do, and arrangements to make once we reach Genoa if we are to pull this off." He unrolled a chart on the table and placed a book on each corner, and began to work in silence.

Lia felt as though she'd been dismissed. She knelt on the bench and faced out the window. To her right was the coast of Sardinia, behind her the open waters of the Mediterranean. They had been getting along so well, she'd begun to think she was truly blessed to have crossed paths with him in Tangier's market, and fortunate that he believed her. Now she wondered what she'd done to deserve his ire.

Never being one to let a question go unasked she said, "What have I done to upset you?"

From behind her she heard the shuffling of the pages as he went from one chart to the next. She went to the table and stood before him. He turned his cool, silver gaze up to her, his expression unreadable.

A minute later, he replied, "I told you last week I wanted your entire story. Yet just now you inform me that you come from noble lineage, and not a minor one at that, and that you are in possession of some wealth. This leads me to wonder what else you've neglected to tell me."

She shifted, uncomfortable at his accusations. "I did tell you, you must not have understood. And, if you think I intentionally misled you in any way, I apologize. It was not my intent. I have always told you the truth."

"Only the amount of truth you think necessary to best serve your need."

"That is not so! I will not stand here and allow you to accuse me of lying to you—whether by omission or directly." Lia reached for the bolt on the cabin door, intending to leave for much needed distance when a chill in his voice froze her in place.

"My men are sailors, not gentleman. You are not to leave this cabin without me."

"Am I now a prisoner?"

"No. You are my *possession*." The Englishman gathered the charts

and his instruments, and stalked from the cabin. Lia wondered at his change in attitude toward her. For the past week, she'd been living with the illusion that he was a man of great compassion and noble character.

Now, she was discovering the man was moody, temperamental, and had a possessive side to him as well.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lia spent the rest of the day alone in Ren's cabin because rain kept her from remaining above deck. The captain's cabin aboard *Warlock* was in the stern of the ship, just under the wheel deck. A row of windows, all opened wide, let in a slight breeze—just enough to ensure the room never got stuffy. The bed in the corner was easily as large as the one she had in the harem, though not nearly as soft. Behind a partition was a cabinet built into the wall that, when folded, hid a chamber pot. A wash stand next to that held a pitcher and basin, and a small folded linen towel. A rectangular dining table, which also doubled as Ren's desk made use of the bench seating beneath the row of windows. The spacious room held nearly every comfort of home. His quarters even boasted a small library along one short wall, with which Lia quickly familiarized herself.

For dinner, Ren sent a boy down with a tray for her. The lamb stew with large chunks of vegetables was quite good. Ren obviously had an English cook, as the man went heavy with cream gravy. After eating as much as she could, she set the tray on the table, and readied herself for bed as the cabin grew dark.

She climbed on top of the mattress and moved as close to the wall as possible, leaving him more than half the bed. His attitude earlier both angered and puzzled her. The man had called her a liar. For that, she was not going to let him touch her tonight. Of course, she would only be denying herself pleasure by punishing him, but he had to learn she was not an object to possess, but a woman with honor, emotions and pride.

Lia replayed their last encounter over and over in her mind. She'd never given him cause to distrust her. Lia realized she had to convince him that she meant to live up to her agreement with him. But after this morning's confusing behavior, and her subsequent imprisonment, that would have to wait until tomorrow.

The cabin door opened and Ren entered carrying a lantern, casting an eerie glow about the room. He hung it from the beam over his desk, and lowered the flame. Lia quickly closed her eyes. His footsteps told her he stood by the bed. The mattress sank under his weight when he sat on the edge. Each boot dropped to the floor with a deep thud, and he relieved himself of his clothing. She steadied her breathing as though asleep. He lifted the covers and slid between the sheets leaving them to cover only the lower portion of his body.

He didn't reach out for her. Never touched her. Before long she heard his breathing slow, and knew he slept. Turning to her other

side, she faced him and relaxed, watching the steady rise and fall of his chest in the moonlight.

The next morning dawned clear, breezy and a little warmer. Last night she had slept soundly again. Another night without the terrible dream. Ren had dressed and left the cabin without disturbing her. A breakfast tray had been left for her on the table. She ate the tasteless fare, glad to have something in her belly.

Foregoing the coat, because of the warmer temperature, Lia stepped onto the deck, intending to stretch her legs by walking in the fresh sea air. The height of the sun in the sky told her the hour was now late. She spotted Ren standing at the helm, the large wheel under his hands. He'd not seen her yet, so she wasn't sure what his mood was this day. She hoped the night had soothed his upset. It had for her.

He'd left the room without reaching for her, and Lia felt she'd made her point. She had to show him she intended to live up to her end of their agreement, and now felt it necessary to reach out to him. She warmed at the thought. Reaching out to the Englishman always ended up with her sated and exhausted.

She smiled as she took the steps onto the upper deck softly and approached him from behind. His entire body stiffened, as though he knew she stood there.

"Good morning, Your Grace," she said cheerfully.

He turned toward her and his cold, hard stare raked over her body. He said nothing to her, but called to the man named Angus. When the other man appeared, Ren turned the wheel over to him and covered her with his jacket that hung on a nearby peg. He took Lia by the arm, his fingers digging into the delicate flesh above her elbow. He led her down the steps and back to the cabin, his hold unyielding until he pushed her through the door.

"What did I do? Why are you...?" She didn't have time to finish as he stood mere inches in front of her, so close she could feel the heat coming off his body.

"Didn't I tell you yesterday not to come above deck unless I accompanied you?"

"Yes, but..."

"Do not interrupt me," he warned. "Look at your manner of dress. What you have on was fine in a Moroccan harem. My men aren't used to seeing a lady clothed as you are. I can almost see through that kaftan, and I know you wear nothing underneath it, or the pantalettes."

"You cannot see through..." Her argument was short-lived as he pulled her against his chest, where his arms held her steadily. Lia felt her face burn as the meaning of his words sank in. Her heart raced as

she sought for an acceptable reply. Anything that would ease his anger, or persuade him to release her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, meeting his icy silver gaze. "They are the only clothes I have. What was I to do?"

"Stay in the cabin, as I ordered you yesterday."

"I just wanted sunshine, and... to see you." Her words hit her mark, effectively taking the gruff out of him.

"You should have waited for me. I would have taken you above. And you would have worn my coat, as you did yesterday, and every day before."

She turned her face and stared out the bank of windows. He was right. She had worn his coat the past few days. He released his grip, and his hands traveled down to her waist. He leaned against the desk and pulled her to stand between his legs. The ship pitched, pushing her into him further. With her hands against his chest, she tried to back away, but he held her firmly in place.

Not wanting to argue when she was so close to rescuing Luchino and Maura, she buried her face in his chest and apologized. Taking another deep, steadying breath she half-heartedly pushed herself away from him, but another pitch of the ship prevented her from doing so.

Still, he held her close, refusing to let her go. His large hands began to move. One going up her back, the other down to cup her buttocks. The man confused her. His words were angry, yet his touch was sensual, demanding. A fluttering sensation grew and spread from low in her abdomen.

"I've discovered I have a possessive side to me, Lia, and I've never known an emotion as strong as this before."

His deep voice held a barely-controlled, rough edge to it. Lia found it arousing to realize she could make him feel these things. Her own body's reaction continued to surprised her.

"Have I done anything to give you cause to question my fidelity?"

"No." He took her chin with his thumb and forefinger, forcing her to look up at him. What she saw in his eyes made her legs buckle beneath her. He wanted her again. Unmistakable desire burned in the depths of his dark silver gaze.

"You are a temptress," he whispered into her temple. His hot breath sent erotic chills through her. "*My temptress.*" She melted into his massive frame, giving him her body, as his tongue traced a path around the shell of her ear. Leaning back, he looked into her eyes. "And I can't get enough of you," he whispered.

His lips thinned before he brought them down hard onto hers. He forced her mouth open and plundered it with his tongue. She found his possessiveness arousing. One of her hands reached into the V of his shirt to stroke the soft curls on his chest. Lia felt his groan in her

mouth, as he continued his assault. His hand released her chin, only to move lower. He cupped her breast and began to squeeze it softly, his thumb playing over her nipple. Then did the same with the other.

His other hand was at the waist of her pantalettes, untying the simple knot, then pushing them down as low as he could without breaking the kiss. His fingers parted and found her.

Weakened with her own desire, Lia pressed closer to Ren. She kissed him back, and parted her legs, allowing him freer access. She moved her hips to meet the stroking of his fingers. She pulled his shirt out of his breeches and ran her hands over the firm muscles of his chest. Breaking away from his lips, she pushed his shirt up and brought her mouth down on one of his nipples. He smelled of oranges and spices, mixed with the salty freshness of the Mediterranean. It was an intoxicating combination she found arousing from the moment they met.

He began to stroke her with his fingers, and she groaned when she felt that now familiar tightness building within her. Her head fell back and his gaze held hers as his fingers continued moving inside her, over her sensitive flesh. She moved in rhythm with his hand, stretching, reaching, yearning, against him and toward her release.

“My beautiful Lia,” he whispered.

Arching her back, she held his gaze as he watched her crest wave after wave. Lia shuddered once more, then fell onto him, sated. Ren grasped the neck of the kaftan she wore and ripped it in half. The sound of the thin material tearing echoed in her ears as he backed her onto the bed.

She started to protest, then he whispered, “Shh...,” as he fumbled with the buttons of his breeches. Lia pushed them down his legs, then kicked her pantalettes off along with her sandals and lay back upon the mattress. She spread her legs, needing him to fill her. He entered in one swift, ardent thrust. She cried out his name. Lia wrapped her legs around him, wanting him as deep within her as he could possibly get. Their union was a wild, primitive mating, intended solely to provide release; to sate the tense, sexually charged aura between them. He moved quickly. Each stroke touched a certain place inside her that carried her higher and higher until her whole body tightened convulsively. She heard Ren growl her name as he, too, found release.

He rested on top of her while he caught his breath. When he attempted to back away from her, she pressed his buttocks with her heels, her inner muscles tightening around him—refusing to let him go. She wished they’d met under different circumstances. Perhaps then they might have had a conventional courtship, fallen in love, then marry as some of her friends had. As it stood, she would now spend the rest of her life in a loveless union, where her husband wanted only

one thing from her. Heirs.

Admittedly, the physical loving was very satisfying. Still, Lia didn't know much about this man. Well, except that he was a fine lover, who owned cargo ships, and was friends with Prince Hakim of Morocco. None of which recommended him as husband material. Yet this was the man she agreed to marry. Sailors were notorious for seeking the comfort of whores while in port. And this man in particular, as handsome and sexual as he was, was likely more guilty than most. Why else would he have purchased her, a woman trained to please men?

"As much as I'd like to spend the day in bed with you, I have work to do. There will be time for more play later." He refastened the buttons on his breeches and tucked in his shirt. Shoving his feet into his boots, he turned to her, his deep warm gaze caressing her bare legs. "We will be in Genoa tomorrow night. Although we won't be able to dock until I receive clearance, I will send a boat with several men to gather information. They'll keep watch on your aunt's house. You will need to give them directions."

He reached for the latch on the door and added, "I will return this afternoon and take you for a stroll on deck if you wish."

Lia suddenly realized what he said. Genoa. They would be there tomorrow. She could barely contain her excitement. She would have her brother and Maura back, perhaps as soon as tomorrow night. Naked, she ran to Ren and threw herself into his arms. "Thank you," she said, kissing his cheek repeatedly. "Thank you, thank you."

"All this for a walk above?" he asked as he stroked the bare curve of her bottom.

Her eyes met his, wanting to express her gratitude as best she knew how. "No." She touched her lips to his once more. "Thank you for everything."

He grabbed her buttocks and lifted her naked body against him, and she pressed into him and kissed him again.

"I must get back to the wheel. We can do more of this later, perhaps before your stroll."

"I would like that very much." Her expression softened. "I look forward to your return."

With that he left her, standing naked in his cabin.

The next evening, the three ships were anchored and tied off, side by side just off Genoa's harbor. Ren, his uncle Angus, and his two cousins, Cully and Flynn, sat at the table in his cabin watching Lia draw a detailed map which would lead them to the *Palazzo di Loretto*.

"It's quicker to walk than take a hired coach. The streets are not very wide, and there are many steps." Lia pointed to the map. "Take

Via Carolina about half a mile, turn right on *Via Santa Lucia*. The *palazzo* is at the end of the street.”

On deck, Ren gave additional orders to his men and waited until their dinghy had been lowered and they were out of sight. He returned to his cabin to find Lia pacing his quarters.

“Someone will report back before morning to let me know what they’ve discovered,” he said. “There’s no use making yourself sick with worry just yet.”

“I can’t help it. We’re so close, I want to go and get them now.”

“That’s not wise. At least not until we know who or what we are up against.” He took Lia into his arms, and stroked her back. Her tears seeped through his linen shirt as he let her cry. He felt helpless to stop her as he didn’t know what to do or say to calm her. So he just held her close as her slight body shook from her deep, racking sobs while she vented her worst fears.

Lia might not have been completely honest with him at first, but she was honest in this, and she had begged his assistance. It was a desperate plea she made, and he had the resources and ability to help her. He knew that to have some semblance of normality in this unorthodox arrangement, he must retrieve the boy and their old nurse. She obviously loved them a great deal.

It wasn’t until after he’d heard her tale that first night, and she’d asked for his help that the proposed arrangement came to mind. To his estimation, this was a perfect solution to both their circumstances. A child for a child.

Surely saving their lives was a fair trade for the heir he needed from her. And, after she gave him a son, she could have freedom from his bed if she wanted. He could set up a mistress again and be content.

Yes, he had it all planned out. Once he had his heir, he and Lia could live separate lives if she so chose, though divorce would be out of the question. As would her taking a lover.

He tensed at the thought of another man sharing her bed, suddenly feeling sick to his stomach and angry enough to lock her away from all men for the rest of her life. He couldn’t fault Hakim keeping his women locked away in a harem—especially if his friend felt half as possessive about his wives, as Ren did about Lia.

She pulled back and turned her red-rimmed eyes to his. Her tears had stopped, but concern still marred her features.

“I don’t know what I’ll do if we are too late,” she whispered.

“Do not give in to despair, Lia. At least until we know.”

Leading her by the hand, he took her to the bed. “You need to rest if you can. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

Lia slept fitfully, when she finally did sleep. She was sure her

tossing and turning had kept Ren awake, which caused him to leave the room well before sunrise. Throwing back the covers, she stretched, then sat up. Morning light poured through the line of windows on the cabin's back wall. Shocked by the late hour, she jumped from the bed. She dressed in the clothes she'd dropped on the floor the night before, eager to hear any news. Surely he would have awakened her if he'd heard anything. As she tied the drawstring on her pantalettes, she noticed a dress draped across the chair at Ren's desk, a pale green, thin muslin gown with red, yellow, and white flowers embroidered above the hem and on the puffed sleeves. She lifted it and held it to her chest, smiling. On the seat, she noticed a neatly folded light cotton chemise, and beneath that, another pair of soft kid slippers. He had acquired more appropriate clothing for her trip into town. She was thankful he had the foresight to anticipate her needs. Heaven knows she had not thought of anything but Luchino and Maura's well-being.

Immediately she removed the pantalettes and dressed in her new, more suitable attire. She wondered how it was possible that everything fit. It was as if Ren knew her exact measurements. She sat on the edge of the bed, and brushed and braided her hair, tying it off with the leather strap Maysun had given her. She stood, wondering if she should risk his wrath again this morning and go above deck, or wait for him to come for her.

For several minutes she paced the cabin, which grew smaller with each lap. Throwing aside any fear now that she had more appropriate clothing, she opened the door, intending to search him out. She wasn't prepared for what she saw when she finally reached the deck.

The bank of windows in the cabin faced the bay, and she'd been unable to see the port. Before her now lay the city of Genoa. Reality hit her. Her ordeal was almost over. She would soon have her brother and Maura with her, possibly as early as this afternoon. She quickly spotted Ren on the deck of the ship tied alongside the one she was on.

Ren saw the flash of color on deck and quickly jumped from *Sorceress* to his lead ship, *Warlock*. Lia was a vision. The dress Cully bought that morning fit her perfectly, and the color made her eyes appear even more green, if that were possible. The bodice hugged her full breasts and exposed more than he liked with sailors about.

When he reached her, she managed a cautious smile. He could not return it though, for he wasn't sure how she would react to the information he had.

"I am sorry, Your Grace, but I could not wait below any longer."

"I was just on my way to see you. I have news." He led her to the cabin where they could talk privately. He shut the door behind them and held the chair for Lia, then leaned back against the desk, holding her gaze.

"I have had men surrounding your aunt's house since we arrived. They have also been asking questions around town. Evidently your aunt has been telling everyone that you have run off." He paused to gauge her reaction thus far. Seeing none, he continued. "And, shortly after you left, your brother's nurse was found dead in her room."

"No!" Lia covered her face with her hands and began to cry. "Maura. Oh, God, no." She looked up at him, her angry green eyes flashing gold sparks. She muttered a barrage of curses in her native tongue, none of which he completely understood. Then, switching to English, she stated, "They killed Maura. I know it." She stood before him now, waiting for more news. "What about my brother? Tell me, does he still live?"

"We are not sure. No one has seen your brother in weeks. Rumor has it he is very ill and near death. The people in the town are praising your aunt, calling her a saint for taking in her destitute niece and dying nephew."

Her screams reverberated through the entire ship. She began pacing and ranting in Italian, arms waving about. He wasn't shocked to hear Lia's vocabulary, as he'd heard her curse the morning after the auction when she awoke in his bed. But what was disturbing, was the fact that none of her comments discounted the story her aunt had spread about her. Ren wondered if he told her about the tale, how she would react. The community believed what the old lady had been telling them about how Lia had become affiliated with the local *Carbonari* since moving from Naples, and that she had run off with them of her own volition.

He wanted to ask her if there was any truth to the story at all, but felt it would only agitate her more, and Ren needed her calm. She had to go with them when they went to get the boy, and it had to be done soon before anyone in the aunt's home suspected anything.

"We must get Luchino before they kill him as well. They were quick to rid themselves of me, and then Maura. That witch is killing my brother and making it appear as though he is ill. *Sta vecchia troia. Io amazza*. I swear I'll kill her!"

"Lia, listen to me." He turned her toward him. "You cannot kill the woman, much as you'd like to. If what you say of her is true, you would be hung for murdering someone not worth dying for. It is best to let the authorities deal with her." She quieted for a moment, long enough for him to continue. "And your brother will need you if he is to come through this ordeal."

Her eyes widened in fear.

"I don't mean to alarm you, but time is of the essence. You must come with us. We must go and get him. Now."

"Well, what are we doing here? *Andiamo!*" She yanked open the

door, banging it into the chair, and ran down the narrow gangway and up the steps to the deck. Ren followed, breaking into a run to keep up with her.

When they reached the dinghy where Cully and Flynn waited, he quickly introduced his cousins as two of his captains. Handing her into the small boat, he climbed in after her. He gave the order, and they were lowered to the water. Once on the dock Ren said, "taking a carriage will draw less attention than the four of us running through town." Cully and Flynn agreed and they soon were in a closed carriage with Lia giving directions to the driver. Ren watched her fidget and curse in her native tongue during the entire fifteen minute ride to her aunt's home. He understood her impatience. He would feel the same if one of his sisters was in a similar predicament.

They pulled up to the house, and Flynn nodded to Ren. "That's the one," he said.

Before the carriage had come to a stop, Lia pushed open the door and hopped out, landing surefootedly on the ground. She ran up the few steps to the two tall, narrow wooden doors, and beat on them while Ren, Cully and Flynn hurried up behind her. It seemed an eternity, but finally the door opened and a portly old man with a weathered face and rheumy eyes stared in stunned silence as Lia pushed her way past and began searching the lower level. She alternately called out for her brother and cursed her aunt.

"Luchino! Where are you? Luchino?" She began taking the steps to the second floor two at a time. Ren nodded to Cully who followed her up the stairs. "Luchino, I'm here! I've come for you!"

She stopped at the landing, and shouted back at the old man, "Flavio, I want my brother's things packed and brought down immediately. Wake my aunt, I want to see her before we leave."

When Lia reached the nursery, she found the door locked. "Luchino! Luchino, are you in there?"

"Lia? Is it really you?" His voice sounded faint, but she heard him. He was here. He was alive.

"Sì, *Caro*," she called out to her brother. Lia pushed and kicked at the white door, to no avail. Ren's man, Cully, motioned her out of the way and moved to break it down. She leaned on the wall opposite the door to catch her breath, relief pouring through her, knowing her brother was still here, still alive. She heard movement in the room and wanted to stop him before he got hurt. "Stand away from the door, Luchino!"

With that Cully took a few steps back and rammed the door with his shoulder—unsuccessfully. He backed up again and kicked. After two more kicks, the door finally splintered away from the frame. Lia ran past Cully into Luchino's room.

The darkened nursery was stifling hot and airless. Searching for her brother, she found him lying on the floor next to the bed. He appeared sickly white, with sunken eyes and deep, dark circles beneath them. His cheekbones protruded from his once-chubby face. She took his hands and kissed them, tears streaming down her face. "Sweetheart, are you well?"

"I don't feel good, Lia. I'm tired." His voice trailed away. She pulled him into her arms. He seemed so thin and frail, not at all like he was when she was abducted.

"Everything will be all right now. I'm taking you away from here."

"Why did you run away?" her brother asked on a breathless whisper. "*Zia Claudina* said you ran off with some men, but I know you didn't. She called you all kinds of bad names."

"I didn't run away, but we can talk about that later." Lia stroked her brother's hair as she continued to cry unashamedly. "Let's get you to the ship where we can get your strength back. We have a long trip ahead of us."

"Ship? We're going on a ship?"

"*Sì, caro*. We're going far away from here. Where *Zia Claudina* and *Ottavia* can never hurt us again. I promise." She lifted him in her arms easily, and that terrified her. Her brother had been heavier than a sack of grain when she last attempted to lift him. Now he was half that.

At the landing, she handed Luchino over to Cully and ran down the steps, where Ren listened intently to her aunt.

"I'm glad to see that my niece has decided to return and take responsibility for her brother," Lia overheard her aunt say in Italian. "The poor boy is so very ill, and misses her so. The physician has not given us much hope that he will get better. I've done all I can for him, to make him as comfortable as possible in his last days."

Lia stopped directly in front of her aunt and slapped her, the force of the blow knocking the older woman's well-coiffed hair askew, leaving a burning pain in her palm and tingles shooting up her arm. "Ran away? You tried to have me killed!"

"*Sei una puttana*," her aunt hissed, as she wiped away a drop of blood trickling from her beak-billed nose.

Lia shook with uncontrollable rage. She drew her hand back to strike the woman again, but Ren grabbed her, holding her tight from behind. "You killed a helpless old woman and are now trying to kill a child," Lia screamed. "Is that your idea of compassion? You tried to have me murdered! You succeeded with Maura, and may God damn your soul for that."

Ren pulled her back, farther away from her aunt. Still, Lia

screamed, "If you ever come near me or my brother again, you're a dead woman. I will kill you myself. Do you understand me?" When she got no response from her aunt, she screamed it again. "Do you understand me!"

"Get out of my house. You whore," Claudina yelled back at her. "Get out! You and that incorrigible little *bastardo* you call a brother."

Ren released her, and used his body to block her from her aunt. Lia wanted nothing more than to lash out at her again. But, instead, she went to the front door, and yanked it hard, knocking it into the tall ceramic planter box hiding in the corner. The planter crashed to the ground and shattered into hundreds of pieces, spreading dirt and plants onto the terrazzo tiled floor.

"This is not the last you shall hear from me. I will see to it you restore all monies from our trust. You are a murderer and a thief!"

Lia waited for Cully, who still carried Luchino, to enter the carriage first, then lowered her head and stepped in. She took her brother from him and cradled him in her lap.

"That was great, Lia," Luchino said, his voice raspy and weak. "Are we really leaving Genoa? Can we go home now?"

"Si. We are going to a new home," she whispered, tenderly stroking the stray curls off Luchino's forehead and kissed his ashen cheek. When she looked down at her open palm, she saw she held tufts of his hair in her hand.

By this time Ren and Captain Flynn were seated and Ren finally got a look at her brother. "Lia, ask him when he last ate."

As Ren spoke with Captain Cully, Lia asked her brother a few questions. His voice was soft and raspy, and she repeated what he said for the men in the carriage. "He doesn't remember the last time he ate a real meal. The servants were ordered not to feed him. His bedroom door was locked, and Ottavia brought him a little piece of bread and one glass of water one time a day."

Ren turned to the other man, "That's what I thought." Turning to Lia he said, "Your brother has been starved. Before we take a long journey on a ship, he should rest and eat. He must build up his strength."

Lia told her brother what the Englishman said, then she added, "You have lost a lot of weight, and are very weak. But everything will be all right now. I have you, and we're going to turn you into a chubby little sausage-man again!"

Ren talked in hushed whispers to the other captains. Lia only heard snippets of their conversation because she was busy kissing her baby brother. She alternately said prayers of thanks that he still lived, and cursed her aunt to hell.

"We'll take rooms at an inn for a few days while your brother gets

his strength back.” Ren spoke to her now. “A sea voyage is hard enough on a healthy person, but for a weak child it could be life-threatening. We are in no real hurry. The old woman cannot possibly hurt us now.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she replied.

“Lia, is he an Englishman?” her brother asked.

“Yes he is,” she replied. “And he’s my friend. He made it possible for me to come get you.”

“Are we going to England now?” His eyes widened in excitement, and a smile formed on his drawn face.

“Once you’re strong enough.”

“Yay,” he said. His subdued excitement was infectious, causing everyone to smile.

Ren directed the driver to take them to the best inn in town, where he proceeded to hire two rooms. He had the inn-keeper send up two trays. One for himself, the other for Lia and her brother.

Once settled with their respective meals, Lia asked Ren what her aunt had said.

“She said you ran off with some men who are involved with the *Carbonari*. She wasn’t upset to see you leave, she said, because these men were influencing you in the worst ways.”

“I don’t know anyone involved with the revolutionaries.” She took a sip of her water. “What did she say about Maura?”

“That she was prostrate with grief after you’d run away and died in her sleep.”

Upon hearing Maura’s name, Luchino began to speak softly to her, tears forming in his deep-set brown eyes. “One night, Maura brought me some food. Ottavia caught us. She started beating Maura with the fire poker. When I saw what Ottavia was doing I tried to stop her and she hit me, too. It hurt, but I didn’t cry. Maura couldn’t get out of her bed for days and days after that. And I was locked in my room again.” Her brother’s voice faded to just above a whisper. “Then Maura died.”

Lia reached for her brother and hugged him tightly, thankful to have him back.

“I miss her, Lia. I miss Mama and Papa, too.”

Lia began to cry with her brother. Ren stood and walked to the window. He looked down at the red-tiled roofs of the buildings below and out to the harbor. Somewhere out there, in the forest of masts, were his ships. They would take him home soon. And with him would be Lia and her brother.

He felt like a heel and owed her an apology. She’d been telling him the truth all along. He had accused her of parceling out information to manipulate him. The night of their dinner in Morocco,

when she first asked him for help, he thought she couldn't possibly be faking the tears and emotion she'd poured out to him. Those emotions had touched a chord deep in his heart.

But he never thought Margaret had been lying to him, either. If he were honest with himself, he almost expected Lia to be lying to him. After all, he'd courted Lady Margaret Skeffington for seven months. Ren thought he knew her well enough to offer for her, and was within a matter of days from signing the contract with her father, only to discover she'd been having an affair with his cousin for some time. He'd been made a fool of in front of the entire ton, because he'd thought theirs could have been a successful marriage. In fact, he was so certain of it, he'd given up his mistress before leaving Town for the holidays. His grandmother had planned a ball to coincide with the betrothal announcement the week before Christmas.

It seemed Lia, like he, had some treacherous family members as well.

Ren knew immediately upon meeting the aunt what kind of woman she was, and he hated the type. Behind her cold, emotionless eyes, and surface friendliness, hid a calculating manipulator. He knew several just like her in his own country, title-hungry, money-hungry women, scheming to grab the highest ranking bachelor either for themselves, or their vain, insipid daughters. He had fallen into one of their traps. Luckily fate intervened, saving him from a life with an unfaithful wife and a child that wasn't his.

Lia had thus far proven herself vastly different from the ladies he was accustomed to. When she spoke to him of economics, literature and science, he knew she'd had a very thorough education, far surpassing what young ladies were taught. Her intelligence exceeded that of most men he knew, and her beauty that of any woman he'd ever seen. She had the uncharacteristic traits of bravery, honesty, and loyalty, which he'd never known a woman to possess in such a great amount. She was also an eager lover, willing to give and take more than any mistress he'd ever had.

All this made his decision to proceed with marrying her easier. He told himself again, that the arrangement was perfect—suiting both their needs. She had no place to go, and he needed a wife to provide him an heir.

He tossed back the contents in his glass and set it on the table. He had to inform Angus, Cully and Flynn. Preparations must be made.

Ren watched as Lia, involved in an animated conversation with her brother, explained her whereabouts for the past few months. She certainly gave her brother a very modified version of events. He interrupted them. "I'm going across the hall. Do not leave this room."

"Yes, Your...." She caught herself and smiled. "Yes, Ren."

CHAPTER NINE

Lia tucked her brother in one of the two small beds in her room, and sat with him until she was sure he slept. Standing, she walked over to the solitary window which faced the port of Genoa, and used the breeze to help dry her freshly washed hair. She wished she'd thought to bring a comb. When she left the ship she didn't think she would be bathing at an inn later in the day. Nor had she been sure she'd have her brother with her, safe and in fair health.

Luchino would be fine. After throwing up his earlier meal, he now ate with gusto, stuffing himself, leaving all the vegetables and some of the broth from his stew. *Well*, she reminded herself, *some things never change*.

Saying another prayer of thanks for his safe return, she turned and looked around the room. She'd ordered Flavio to pack Luchino's clothing, but in her haste to be out of her aunt's home, they'd left without them. Luchino had been in bed, wearing only his nightclothes when they carried him away. The devil take her, but she was not going back to that place ever again. Not even for her brother's clothing. She would have to ask Ren if he could find an outfit for him. Perhaps a lad on the ship could spare a pair of breeches and a shirt. They might be too large, but they could be made serviceable.

She opened the door and cautiously looked both ways down the hallway. Seeing no one, she stepped out, intending to knock on the door to Ren's room. He'd said it was just across the hall. But, when she lifted her hand to knock, she heard the sound of raised voices and stopped. Her ears burned when she realized the occupants were discussing her.

"Ye think it'll be that easy, eh?" She heard the gruff voice of the old seaman, Angus. It sounded as though he was berating one of the occupants of the room. "Because of the speed at which ye married, people will talk, ye know." Pressing against the wall outside the cracked-open door to his room, Lia listened to their conversation.

"Aside from Hakim and Ismael, you three are the only ones who know the truth of it all," Ren said. "If anyone learns anything other than I met and married the daughter of an Italian gentleman, it will have to come from one of you."

"Have ye thought about if it's even legal? She may be a breast-beating Catholic."

"She is, but I can convince her to convert."

Lia wanted to stomp into the room and knock some sense into his archaic little brain. She'd already told him she would not convert. Did

he not understand her? Didn't he know she meant what she said?

She wondered at the relationship he had with these men who spoke with him so openly about his personal life. There was more mumbled dialog, she couldn't make out what was said, then she heard Ren's reply. "I'm keeping her. That's all there is to it." To her ears, Ren sounded frustrated, tired of defending his decision. "You know of my urgent need for an heir. As I see it, she needs a place to go, and I need a broodmare. It works just fine in my mind."

A broodmare? How could he say such a thing? And to men she did not know! It didn't matter that she'd made the agreement with him, he didn't have to spread this around to his friends. To do so meant he had no respect for her and for what she would give up to leave her home and remain with him.

"You should leave her here," Captain Cully said, "in her own country. Ye know it's the right thing to do! Help the lass get her inheritance back, and she could have a nice enough life here...."

"We made a bargain," Ren cut in. "Her brother for my heir, which she likely already carries. After she bears me the requisite heir and spare, and they're safely tucked away, I'll do what all fine, upstanding gents do, set her aside and take a mistress. If she wants to go back to Italy with her brother at that point, then I'll send her back."

Lia's face burned with humiliation that she was being talked about in such a crude manner. So, he thought to marry her in name only, and remain married until she provided him a son, then set her aside? The man needed to learn she would never give up her child, agreement or no agreement.

"And, for propriety's sake, there will be no mention of the events of the past weeks. As soon as I have contrived a believable tale to explain our meeting and marriage, I'll let you know so our stories don't differ. It is imperative that there are no questions of my heir's legitimacy."

"He's got a point there," said Angus.

"Yeah," replied another voice. Captain Flynn?

Another moment of silence, then Captain Cully said, "I'll never say a word of this. No one's likely to believe it!"

Lia had heard enough. She quietly stepped back into her room. Once the door was locked, she allowed her tears to fall, though she wasn't quite sure why she was crying. Yes, she agreed to the arrangement, but she'd hoped that one day she might come to mean something more to the Englishman.

Oh, who was she fooling? She was no better than a broodmare. She'd sold her body for the life of her brother and would gladly do so again. But not if she knew he'd take her children after he was done with her and set her aside.

As it stood, she was sure of two things. Ren really did want to marry her, and he really did want her to bear two sons for him; “...*the requisite heir and spare,*” is what he told the three men across the hall.

She knew love was something that grew with time, but she had hoped it might be something he’d welcome. However, it didn’t appear that way now. He only needed her body to produce his legal heirs.

The tears continued to fall silently down her face. He didn’t care for her beyond her keeping up her end of the bargain. If he took her sons and sent her away, she might never be allowed to see them. Then she had frightful thought. If her own aunt tried to have her killed, why wouldn’t a stranger if he wanted to be rid of her?

Images of her mother flashed through her mind. Her kind and gentle mother, who loved her children beyond imagination. A woman who did anything for their happiness. She always wanted to be like her if she were one day blessed with children.

The Englishman was using her, and she had allowed him. Worst of all, she had enjoyed his lovemaking. She had even begun to care for him. And *that* had been a big mistake.

She must leave. While leaving him was easy.

Taking a chair, she sat at the table and lowered her head to rest on her crossed arms. She had to think, had to formulate a plan to escape him. Her mother still had family in Rome. Surely they would welcome her and her brother.

But what about Luchino? She worried how his health would fare were she to subject him to the long trip. Travel through Italy by land would take far too long, and cost more money than she could get her hands on. A voyage by boat would be quicker and less expensive. But how was she to come up with the money? She had no access to anything of value to sell.

Then a thought struck her. Find a ship headed for *Cittavecchia* and stow away on board. It would not be easy, but it could be done. She’d heard many stories of children stowing away. If it was easy enough for a child, surely it was easier for an intelligent, grown woman.

Suddenly Lia remembered what her father had always said, “*If you want it enough, you will find a way.*” There was nothing she wanted more than her freedom.

A knock on the door brought her out of her contemplations. She opened it to find the young maid had come to take the trays, and to see if Lia needed anything else.

At the sight of the maid, her plan began to fall into place.

Later that afternoon, Lia again sat at the window, this time watching the sun sink into the horizon. The clothes the maid had brought for her and Luchino were safely tucked away under the

mattress, and she recalled the last words she said to the girl.

“Per vita mia,” she’d said, “you cannot say a thing about what you have done for me.” She took the girl’s hands in hers and kissed them. “I have no way to repay your kindness, but I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

The girl smiled then departed, leaving Lia to work out the details of her escape.

A soft knock stirred her from her thoughts and she rose to open the door. Ren entered, but left two women in the hallway. Lia placed her finger on her lips to signal that her brother slept, and he motioned for her to come with him.

Once in the hallway, she shied away from his direct gaze, knowing what she did, and that she didn’t plan to stay with him. He smiled softly, revealing his fine, even white teeth, and the indentation in his right cheek. He looked freshly bathed and shaved. His black hair was still damp and clung to his head, a curl wrapping around an ear.

“I have brought a seamstress for you,” Ren said. “You will need more clothes, and she is here to begin taking measurements.”

Lia could not hold his gaze long because of her guilt over the planned escape later that night. Besides, she now knew how he really felt about her.

A gray-haired woman came forward, her hair twisted tightly into a bun at her nape. The no-nonsense hairstyle and her spartan black dress led her to believe this was the seamstress. The other woman was younger. Lia assumed she was the assistant. The older woman asked her to stand.

“Her coloring is good,” the woman said after walking around her slowly. “She should be able to wear many fashionable colors and styles.” She called her assistant forward.

Ren nodded to the seamstress, then turned to Lia and said. “Dinner will be up shortly. We will dine together.”

“Your Grace?” Lia stopped him as he was about to leave. He turned to her again and this time she held his gaze. “I was wondering if we could have an outfit or two for Luchino,” she lied, knowing they would be gone before the clothing was delivered. “We left without his things and all he has are his sleep clothes.”

“I’ll have something sent from the ship.”

“Thank you.” Lia lowered her eyes.

After Ren left, the women took her measurements, and made their notes. Once they too had gone, Lia relaxed again until Luchino woke up.

She had decided to say nothing to him yet, as he might slip and reveal their secret at dinner with Ren. She would tell her brother as he changed into the clothes hidden under the bed.

Before long their dinner trays arrived and soon after Ren strode in carrying clothing for Luchino. Lia pretended nothing was amiss, and as she placed their cups on the table, her brother changed into his new clothing. Ren looked at her with a steely silver gaze. She was sure those eyes could read her soul, and knew of her intent to flee into the night.

“What is wrong, Lia?” Ren asked.

“Nothing. It’s just...”

“Lia, look, they fit!” Luchino clutched the waistband to keep the knickers from falling to the ground about his bare feet. Ren and Lia laughed at the sight.

“I’ll have to see if we can find you some rope to tie around you to hold those up. We can’t have your breeches falling in public, now can we?” Ren turned to Lia, “There’s much you and I need to discuss. Perhaps after dinner Cully and Flynn can keep watch over the boy, and we can be alone.”

Lia nodded and sat in her chair to eat. His idea of discussion always ended up with them naked on the bed. Not that she didn’t enjoy his skilled lovemaking, because she did. It’s just they usually didn’t get to the intended discussion.

After a delicious dinner, Cully and Flynn arrived bearing a deck of cards to keep the boy amused and assured Lia that her brother would be fine in their care. Ren then took the bottle of wine, and led her across to his room where he locked the door. Setting the bottle on the table, he reached for her and wrapped his arms about her lightly and rested his hands on her backside. It felt good holding her this way. It had been too long. At least since yesterday afternoon, and now as he stared into her eyes, he felt the familiar stirring in his loins. How was he ever going to return to his normal routine? Thoughts of bedding this woman filled his brain. At his age he shouldn’t be behaving as a great rutting beast of eighteen. He had to get this out of his system before he returned home, or else he’d be thought a hen-pecked fool, and he’d never be able to show his face at Jackson’s again.

Her silken brown hair fell loose about her shoulders and cascaded down her back in a tumble of waves. His fingers toyed with the ends that reached past her waist, and his lips ached to taste hers. So he’d be a fool for a few more days because this felt right.

She pulled away from him and took a few steps out from his reach. “You wished to discuss something with me?”

“Not particularly.” He stepped toward her, closing the distance between them.

“But during dinner you said...”

“I know what I said, Lia. Would you have me tell you, in front of your brother, that I desired your body?”

Her green eyes momentarily widened in shock, and her mouth parted in a wide O. Ren watched, fascinated with the tip of her tongue, as it darted out to moisten her lips. He kissed her, backing her toward his bed, and turned them before falling backward onto the mattress. Lia lay on him laughing. Holding her head, he brought her mouth down to his, and his tongue coaxed her open so he could plunder her depths. Tasting the sweet wine she'd just had with their dinner, his tongue explored the nuances of her smile. He considered himself fortunate to have found her. The woman was more intoxicating than the best bottle of single-malt he owned.

And tomorrow afternoon she would be his legally. He would have her in his bed every night until she gave him the heirs he needed, and even then he wasn't sure if he would be done with her, though he intimated as much earlier to his uncle and cousins. No, for some reason he didn't think he would ever tire of her.

Ren tore his lips from hers and placed a row of kisses along her jawline toward the highly sensitive area just below her ear. When his tongue touched it she arched into him, as she had each time since the first night, making him feel wanted and desired. As a man, not as a title, or means to an end. Her low moan fed his aching desire for her.

Her hands slid down his sides to pull his shirt up and placed her hands on his bare back, holding him tightly, making his cock ache. The feel of her hands on his skin was painfully arousing. There had been women he'd bedded in the past who were repulsed by the hair on his back and chest. His Lia was not. She never pulled away in fear or disgust. Instead her fingers played on him, titillated him, and tortured him. And he loved it.

In his opinion, after they were married they would have all the time in the world to explore each other's likes and dislikes. Right now, her entire body naked and riding him was what he wanted. He began to work the row of buttons on the thin muslin and the sash tied at her back. When he reached her chemise, he groaned in disappointment because it blocked his feel of her smooth skin.

A broodmare, that's what he'd called her. The man thought of her only as a means to an end. Lia had to leave him tonight. Before she fell further under his seductive spell.

She would leave him tonight, but right now she was going to make love with him as though there was no end to their time together. As though her fantasy of a real, loving partnership, such as she'd seen with her parents, might actually exist between them.

Lia forced herself to remember every detail of this moment. The

feel of his hands on her sensitive skin, and the way his soft lips sent shivers racing through her body as he covered her naked flesh with kisses. He used his fingers, lips, and other parts of his body to stir her desire for him, and stoke a fire within her so raging the only relief was his loving. These memories would warm her through the many long, lonely nights ahead. They would have to last the rest of her life, for after making love with this man surely no other could compare.

Her body sang as he toyed with her nipples through the bodice of her gown. She brought her hands to his chest, and began unbuttoning his shirt. When it was undone, she pushed it from his broad shoulders and traced her palms over the sculpted muscles of his chest and back. He quickly divested himself of the shirt and returned to her before her skin had a chance to cool. She brought her lips to one nipple, laved it with her tongue, and gently suckled him. Pushing him back to the mattress, she straddled him, her hair creating a curtain about his face, blocking what little light there was from the single candle in the room.

She leaned forward and kissed his chin, then traced her tongue along the length of his jaw, licking her way to the area beneath his ear, curious if it held the same effect for him that it did for her.

It did. His hardened shaft pushed upward toward her, but was trapped by the breeches he still wore. Ren furiously unbuttoned the row of tiny buttons on the back of her dress. That done, he bunched her skirt up about her waist while she continued to caress his neck and chest. Breaking away, she sat up and helped him tug the dress and chemise over her head. He tossed it across the room, but Lia didn't care, for his lips were already on her breasts, his mouth sucking greedily first at one nipple, then the other. He stoked the fire in her as he stroked her waist and back, then grabbed her bottom and drew it up toward his face. Unaware of what he wanted, she was shocked when he parted her fleshy lips and his tongue began to work his magic on her most sensitive spot. She would miss this pleasure he gave her.

As his tongue tickled, his teeth gently nibbled. His fingers penetrated her, causing her to fall forward, grabbing on to the painted iron headboard as he brought her to her first climax that night.

While her inner body still convulsed, he guided her off him and quickly removed his breeches. He resumed his place beside her, drew her into his arms and kissed her, sharing her essence with her.

"I love the way you taste," he whispered.

Knowing this was her last night with him, and knowing how much he had enjoyed it when she did it before, she broke the kiss and slid her body down his length until she knelt between his knees. She gently stroked the long, thick shaft in one hand, and caressed his sac with the other. When the first clear drop appeared she licked the head

of his manhood, tasting him. Her tongue lapped around the head, and she raised her eyes to watch him. His eyes were shut tight, his lips thinned and he grimaced as though in agony. She shifted her position, her hand still stroking his shaft lightly.

Suddenly she felt the need to have Ren remember her after she was gone. She wanted him to wish it was *her* he was loving when he took another woman. She wanted him to miss her passion and intimate kisses when he married another woman one day. "Ren," she whispered. His dark silver-gray eyes opened and met hers. She held his gaze as she lowered her head and licked the salty sweetness from him. "I love the way you taste as well."

Lia took him deeply into her mouth and teased his shaft with her tongue for only a few seconds before she moved up his body to straddle him. She sheathed him with a swift downward plunge. His hands held her bottom and he moved with her as she began her frenzied ride. When she felt his body tense she quickened her pace, milking his climax from him as she joined him in ecstasy.

Lia collapsed onto his sweat-slickened chest, and Ren's arms wrapped around her, holding her close. She felt his racing heart pound beneath her cheek as his palms caressed her back tenderly.

"That was amazing," he whispered on a ragged breath.

She smiled to herself as she nuzzled the slope of his neck. After several minutes, Ren lifted her from him.

"I would like nothing more than to spend the rest of the night with you," he said, "but there is a little boy across the hall that needs you, and I have an errand I must see to personally."

She closed her eyes, saying a prayer of thanks. Unwittingly, he was making this easier for her. He must have mistaken the look for fear, because he added, "Will you be all right for a few hours? If you want, I'll leave a man at your door."

"No. We'll be fine. I'll lock the door and not open it for anyone," she said, desperate to reassure him.

"Very well," he replied.

They dressed, and Lia smoothed and rearranged her loose hair.

"Where do you go at this late hour?"

"I need to see a man about a noose."

She gave him a quizzical stare.

"You will understand later," he said, and planted a kiss on top of her head.

Lia looked down at her brother and ruffled his curly black hair one more time before opening the door to the darkened hallway. If the maid had done her part, the door leading from the kitchens to the alleyway behind the inn was unlocked.

“Are you okay? You aren’t scared are you?” She wanted to be absolutely sure he was up to this before she risked his still fragile health.

“Nothin’ ever scares me,” Luchino whispered boldly into the inky blackness of the room.

“Good. Let’s go.” The door creaked open, slowly at first, then a little more, until it widened enough for Lia to put her head through and check the hallway. No one stirred. The entire inn was eerily quiet. She opened the door wider and stepped out of the room. With Luchino’s hand in hers, she led him through and slowly, silently, closed the door behind her.

Her heart pounded in her chest, as though she had run for miles. She led her brother toward the servant’s stairwell at the opposite end of the hall. As they passed the main stairs leading down to the lobby, she heard male voices from the inn’s tap room. None of the voices sounded familiar, nor did any speak English. She breathed a sigh of relief as she continued down the hallway to the steps, which would lead her to the back door. And freedom.

They proceeded through the inn’s small kitchen and found the exit without incident. The dim light from the coals glowed in the hearth, facilitating her search as Lia groped for the knob. Once located, she opened the door cautiously. She offered a small prayer of thanks before she looked both ways down the alley, then gave Luchino permission to come through. Both free, she leaned back against the wall and released a long-held breath.

Dressed as boys, they made their way down the steep alleyway and rounded the corner onto the street leading directly to the docks. The only light to guide their path down the narrow brick-paved street came from the nearly full moon which cast an incandescent glow through the low-hanging clouds above them. The streets were slick with a heavy dew, bleeding down the walls around them, and dripping from the overhanging balconies. The sound of water lapping against the pilings, and the smell of dead fish and tar from the wharf assured her that she headed in the right direction.

As they neared the first pier, Lia felt Luchino stumble and nearly fall. “Do you want me to carry you?” she asked.

“No, I’m fine.” He straightened and pulled his hand away. “I tripped, that’s all.”

They asked a man sitting along the dock if he knew of a ship bound for *Cittavecchia*. He hadn’t heard of one. She swallowed her fear. Lia realized the men she spoke with weren’t the gentlemen she was accustomed to, but she also knew she had no other options. They continued down each of the piers asking along the way, until finally they found one. By this time Luchino was riding on Lia’s back.

The moon was beginning its descent, and the fog was losing its eerie luminescence. Soon the sun would rise and dry the town. She and her brother would have to be on the ship, already hidden, in order to make good their escape. They could not walk on in broad daylight.

Hiding among the empty barrels and boxes piled along the edges of a warehouse, Lia tried desperately to ignore the scratching sounds of the creatures around them. Nearby a cat yowled and hissed, sending something running across her feet. Chills coursed through her body at the thought of what it might be. She fought the urge to scream over a mere rat. She must be strong for Luchino.

Lia scanned the dock for the next few minutes, waiting for the opportune moment to make her move. Finally, the last two drunken sailors boarded the vessel alongside the ship she and Luchino needed to board. With no one else about, they had to get on it quickly.

“Luchino, can you run, or should I carry you again?”

“I can make it, Lia.”

He didn’t sound convincing, but it was quicker and easier for him to run with her, than for her to carry him.

“We have to do it now.” With that, she and Luchino broke into a run for the boarding plank of the ship some twenty yards ahead. With one hand she held down the cap covering her hair, in the other she held her brother’s hand.

“*Aspetto!*” A voice behind her shouted.

“I think that’s them,” she heard a second man say, this time in English.

Luchino stumbled and fell, bringing Lia down with him. She quickly regained her footing, and heart racing, scooped up her brother and ran for the boarding plank, never looking back at those who followed.

Her cap flew off and her hair tumbled down in a thick, single braid to the middle of her back. She kept running as fast as she possibly could while carrying her brother.

Just as she was about to step onto the plank of wood that led to freedom, an arm wrapped about her waist, yanking her back. Luchino held onto her neck tightly, even as she dropped him. Her arms snaked out, preventing him from falling into the water.

Her back slammed into the hard, solid wall of the Englishman’s chest. She knew it was him even though he didn’t speak and she couldn’t see him. His scent surrounded her, just as his arms did, while she held onto her brother. One of his men came around and took Luchino from her grasp as she cursed Ren in Italian.

“No! Don’t take my brother,” she cried, as she struggled to free herself from his vice-like grip. “Bring him back! He’s all I have left.”

Struggling was useless, his hold on her was unforgiving.

"Lia! Lia!" her brother cried out for her, prompting Lia to struggle more.

"Quit fighting me, Lia. He'll be fine." To the man holding her brother, he said, "Take the boy to *Sea Witch* and tell Cully to keep an eye on him. Then find Flynn. Send him and two more men to me." Lia pulled free from his grasp as he spoke and turned to run after her brother, but he caught the collar of her jacket and yanked her back to him. The Englishman lifted her effortlessly, tossed her over his shoulder and began the hike back up the steep, narrow street to the inn.

"Let me down!" She pounded her fists against his back and thrashed her legs. All it got her was a painful swat across the bottom.

"Continue behaving like a child, and I'll spank you again."

"Let me down! *Bestia!* Let me down!"

"Shut up," he said, holding her tight across the back of her legs. He did not say another word to her the entire way back. He continued to carry her in that manner through the lobby of the inn, thankfully empty at this hour of the morning, then up the stairs, where he deposited her, with a thud onto the single chair in her bedroom.

The maid entered with the innkeeper, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen. She looked as though she had been beaten, and for that Lia was deeply sorry.

"My lord," the innkeeper said, "I regret the inconvenience that Ghita here caused you. She has been duly punished and now wishes to apologize." The short, skinny man pushed the girl forward.

"*Mi dispiace,*" she said through her tears, without once lifting her eyes to either Ren or Lia. The poor thing then ran from the room as though the hounds of Satan were on her heels.

Lia instinctively moved to follow her, to console her, but Ren blocked her path. Just then three men, Flynn and two others, entered. The innkeeper, still apologizing, backed his way from the room, closing the door behind him when he left.

What was she going to do now? She had to get back to Luchino. He was probably afraid. He didn't know these men who took him. A knot began to form in her throat and she struggled to keep it down. "Give me back my brother. He's all I have." Swiping the offensive tear that spilled down her cheek, she continued, "It's taken me so long to get him back." Lia sat in the chair next to the table, feeling deflated, but not defeated. "So long."

"I want both doors of this inn under guard," Ren said tersely. "And I want someone under her window. This is not to happen again." He turned his clear, icy gaze to her. She shivered at what she saw there. Disappointment and distrust.

His men left to assume their posts, leaving her standing in the middle of the room and Ren holding the door.

"I can't believe you would jeopardize your brother's health after everything you've done to save him."

His penetrating gaze unsettled her and she turned away and stared out the window. "Because I want freedom. Unlike some women, I don't see being forced into a marriage with anyone, as being free."

"You weren't forced. We made an agreement. I have lived up to my end, and have rescued your brother, and now you run. Why?"

She swung around and met his hardened gaze. "Because all you want is a broodmare!" She saw him wince, but she pressed on, "That was your word to describe *me*! You said you would take my children from me and dispose of me. I heard you say this, Your Grace. Since my own aunt tried to have me killed, how am I to know you won't try the same and be successful?" Lia stood and went to him, her ire rising again. Staring into his face, she tried to read any emotion from him, but saw none but anger. Unafraid, she continued. "I don't know who you are. You know everything about me, yet I know nothing about you. I don't know why you need an heir now, but evidently you need one badly enough that you are willing to marry *me*, someone who wants to be more than a broodmare."

He looked at the open door, and tempering his voice he said, "We can discuss it tomorrow."

The cold eyes, and tightened muscles in his cheeks told her he wanted no argument just then, but she wasn't giving in so quickly. He had her brother. "No! I want to know now," she shouted at him. "You've taken my brother from me. You tell me *now*, why you want me to marry you. Why not find someone agreeable to marriage, why force me?"

"I will not let you go, because you may already carry my child."

"That's not good enough," she countered. "Let me and my brother go. I will find my relatives in Rome. Maybe one day I might even find love. But one thing is for certain Your Grace, no one wishes to live their life as a possession. Even if it is pampered and protected. A gilded cage is still a cage."

"You belong to me, Lia." he said tersely. "Get any thoughts of escape out of your head." He stalked from the room and slammed the door behind him. She ran to the door, and pounded on it before she heard the sound of the key turning the lock from the outside. Exhaustion and frustration finally catching up with her, she sank to the floor in tears, wondering why this was happening to her.

CHAPTER TEN

Lia awoke to the sound of two maids entering with a bathing tub, and two more carrying buckets of hot water. Clearing the sleep from her tired and sore eyes, she watched as the inn keeper's wife entered bearing a tray with her morning meal. A short woman with gray hair and a pinched face, she looked as though she spent her days sucking lemons.

"I didn't order a bath or food," Lia said when the maids were gone.

"His lordship ordered them for you." The woman's tone told Lia she obviously disapproved of her presence in her husband's establishment.

"I'm not hungry. You can take the tray back." She plopped back onto the bed and covered her aching head with the pillow.

"I can only bring what the man ordered," the woman said stiffly. "What you do with it is your business." She gave a harrumph, then turned and left the room as the maids returned with more water.

She rose and went to the window to avoid looking at the women entering or the guard at her door. Instead, she stared out onto the tiled roofs of the buildings of the city. Lia had given the situation a great deal of thought over the long night. The Englishman had lived up to his end of the bargain, and admittedly, she was indebted to him for rescuing her brother. She'd always thought herself an honorable person, one who kept her word. Last night was the first time she'd ever tried to run away from a promise she made. For that she was ashamed.

But she had heard this Englishman talk of things that changed their agreement. Things he felt free to discuss with others, but not with her, the woman he would take as his wife.

This betrayal of her trust stung. Though what hurt most, was his admitting that once she gave him his heirs, he would set her aside, separating her from her children. That wasn't a man who intended to live up to the marriage vows, made before God, that were part of their agreement. Any marriage with him under these circumstances would be doomed from the beginning.

She swiped at a stray tear, refusing to let it fall. She would not feel sorry for herself. It didn't matter now that she'd dreamed of marrying for love. The reality of her situation was now different. She was thankful to him for saving her brother, and she would keep her end of the bargain. Because, in the end, a loveless union was easily worth her brother's life. But before Lia married the Englishman, he

would have to promise never to separate her from her children.

Feeling grimy and hungry, she looked to the tray on the table. The food was probably cold by now, as was her bath. She dipped her fingers in, testing the water. It was barely warm, and it would get uncomfortable fast if she didn't hurry. The chicken stew was also getting cold. Grease congealed around the edge of the tureen, and a thin layer formed across the top. She reached for the bread. Even though hard and chewy, it was still more palatable than the contents of the bowl.

Lia stripped out of the dirty boys clothing she still wore, slid into the tepid bath, and began scrubbing. There was no telling how soon Ren would come for her, and she wanted to be presentable when he arrived. Besides, she could think more clearly when she was clean.

Ren stood in front of the small mirror on the shaving stand and wiped blood from his chin, wondering how he managed to cut himself on dry land when he hadn't done so on his ship in years. He tossed the razor into the bowl of soapy water and dried his face. He had to hurry if he were to make it out and back in time. In his haste to get a priest and a license yesterday, he had forgotten one thing. A damned ring.

Surely there must be a goldsmith or jeweler nearby from whom he could purchase a plain gold band. Once they arrived in England, he would give her something more suitable, but for now a simple band would have to do.

He tucked his shirt into his breeches and pulled his boots on. On his way out, he checked with Flynn to make sure Lia was behaving herself.

"Hadn't heard a peep from her since the innkeep's wife left," Flynn reported.

"Good." Ren nodded in approval. "The seamstress should be arriving soon with Lia's clothing. Have the woman help my bride dress. I'll be back shortly."

As he passed the public room, he spotted the innkeeper. Perhaps he might know of a place where he could purchase a modest ring.

"I have a cousin whose son-in-law is a fine jeweler. His shop is just around the corner," the old man said pointing, "and down about a hundred yards. His name is Guiseppe Casale. It's written on the door."

"*Mille grazie, Signore*," Ren said, thanking the man as he left the inn. He'd made it as far as the bottom step when a young woman's voice stopped him.

"Your Grace?"

He turned and looked at the lady before him, barely more than a child, and wondered what she wanted. She clutched the cloak tight, it's hood pulled low, almost covering her eyes.

“Yes?” he replied.

“If I could but have a moment of your time. It is a matter of great urgency.” She stepped up into the inn’s public room before pushing back the hood to reveal sparkling sapphire blue eyes and golden blond hair piled high and artfully arranged on top of her head. “I am Julianna Gualtiero, Angelia’s cousin. I wish to speak to her if I may.”

So this was the daughter of the aunt who had attempted murder twice, and quite possibly succeeded with the boy’s nurse. Nothing more than a child, she appeared as a glorious golden angel, frightened and in need of help. Every instinct in him cautioned him to proceed with care. He didn’t trust Lia. She might have sent for her cousin in another foolish attempt to escape him.

It only took a moment to arrive at his decision.

“I will allow you to see her, on one condition. I will be witness to your conversation.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” she replied, demurely lowering her eyes.

Something about her behavior gave him cause for concern. The girl held her black cloak about her with a grip that turned her knuckles white. Her eyes compelled him. At first he’d mistaken it for fear, but that wasn’t it. She was hiding something beneath her cloak. Then he knew.

That scheming wench he was about to take to bride was luring this innocent to help her in her escape.

Ren led the girl through the establishment, past the innkeeper, and up the stairs to his room. Flynn gave him a curious glance as Ren opened the door and showed the young woman in. In his room, with the door still open so he could keep an eye on her, he gave Flynn directions to the jeweler’s shop and instructed him to get a band for Lia.

He then knocked on Lia’s door and called out for her. The sound of water sloshing in the tub told him what she was doing.

“Don’t come in!” she shouted. “Please! Give me a moment to collect myself.”

“Come across to my room as soon as possible,” he instructed, unlocking her door.

He entered his room, leaving the door open so he could guard the entrance to Lia’s room. “It seems your cousin is occupied,” he told the girl in Italian. “She will be here momentarily. Is there something I could help you with?”

“I have come seeking a way out of my mother’s home,” she said slowly. “I was hoping that Lia would—that you would—take me with her.”

He shook his head. “That is not possible.”

At his negative response, she immediately began to cry, giant

pear-shaped tears that instantly fell in torrents down her cheeks. Instinctively he moved toward her, wanting to calm her, when she dropped the cloak she held so tightly only moments before, and began screaming as though she were being murdered.

Ren took in her disheveled and torn gown which revealed a generous amount of cleavage. The chemise underneath was torn as well and her full breasts were near to spilling out of her corset. She screamed and screamed until his bloody ears rang with the shrill sound of her high pitched voice.

The innkeeper and his wife appeared to see what the commotion was and the girl ran into the old woman's arms and began to cry.

"I came here to see my cousin," she said through her tears, "to wish her well on her journey. And that monster tried to force himself on me. When I refused him, he became enraged and tried to rip my gown from my body."

"The lying chit!" Ren exclaimed. The tone of his voice threw the girl into further hysterics. He watched as the innkeeper's wife wrapped her arms around the scheming female and soothingly stroked her back.

The girl looked to the innkeeper. "I beg you, please, get my mother. I want my mother." She turned her face into the older woman's shoulder and continued to cry, this time including loud wailing sounds for theatrical effect.

"I did no such thing and you know it," Ren bellowed. "You lying little bitch! I don't know what game you play, but it will get you nowhere. Do you hear me? Nowhere!"

Ren paced circles in the tiny corner of the small room. He was furious with himself for falling for the tale of another devious, conniving female. And he'd thought this one an innocent!

Women. They were all the same.

"Get out of my room!" When she made no move to leave, but began to scream more, he pushed past her and saw Lia standing at the door, her hair wrapped in a towel and her dress plastered to her still damp skin. He gave a vile curse about all women and strode into Lia's room, calling out the window for Angus to come up and bring more men.

He re-entered the fracas when Angus arrived, and began to explain what had happened when the nightmare only got worse. The aunt, the woman he had hoped never to see again, and mother of the girl that was accusing him of attempted rape, appeared. Behind her was her housekeeper, and a footman.

Lia, her cousin, the aunt, the housekeeper, the innkeeper and his wife were all shouting at each other at the top of their lungs. Their hands were flying about and they were speaking so quickly he was

lost, but what he could make out sounded as though Lia was defending him.

How could she have possibly known what transpired? He didn't know how much she'd witnessed, but it couldn't have been the entire scenario, for he'd seen no one standing in the doorway as he walked toward the girl to comfort her.

"*Chiama la guardia,*" the aunt screamed. "*Chiama la guardia!*"

He turned to Lia, "What the hell is she saying?"

"Right now she is screaming for someone to call the constable. She says you compromised her daughter, who is a lady gently reared." Lia rolled her eyes at this, "and is insisting you marry her now because no true gentleman will believe that she is still a maid after what has taken place here today."

Ren's anger boiled over. "What?" Now it was his turn to scream. "I never touched the lying chit. The door was wide open the entire time. I have nothing to explain!"

He began to pace in circles, hissing, "I knew it. I just knew it. How could I have fallen for this? I picked up that something was wrong downstairs, but I thought, 'Noooo, not this one. She's too angelic-looking.' When am I ever going to learn?"

Angus came up to him and pointed his finger right in Ren's face. "I don't ken why ye always feel like ye need to be rescuing the fairer sex. They're more treacherous than a north wind. And I've learned the older I get, that the prettier they are, the more wicked they be."

Ren had had enough. Placing two fingers between his lips, he whistled. The sound pierced the din, silencing everyone. Once all eyes turned to him, he began pointing at people. "You, out!" he shouted to two of his men. "You too," he scowled at Lia's cousin, the innkeeper, his wife, the aunt's housekeeper, and the footman. "Angus, watch the little bitch and the housekeeper out in the hallway."

With only Claudina and Lia in the room, he spoke in a barely controlled rage. "I know what you want. You're just like all the rest. And you will get nothing from me. Nothing. Do you understand me?"

The old woman spat at the toe of his boots. "You ruined any chance of my daughter ever making a good match! You will at least give her your name now that you have taken her spotless reputation."

"He will do no such thing," Lia stated with venomous anger. Ren stared at her in amazement. "This was a plan that you and Ottavia concocted." He watched closely as Lia stood up to her aunt and began reciting what she saw and heard.

"I stood at the open door and listened as your daughter began some sad tale about wanting to leave your house and go to England with us. She'd never be able to create any such tale on her own—much less act on it. Neither of your children has a backbone stronger

than *pasta morbida*. Her lines were practiced, and she is a horrible actress." Lia stepped closer to Ren and added, "By the way, that was one of my dresses you tore."

"It was a cheap rag!" The aunt turned to him, and he could see she knew she was trapped. "Your Grace," she said, and immediately her eyes grew wide as she realized her mistake.

She addressed him by his title. "Wait. What makes you think I'm a noble? We told no one here, not even the innkeeper."

"*Sta puttana*, addressed you as such in front of the seamstresses and you responded," she stated. "It was an easy deduction."

He was sure now. No woman was ever to be trusted. Ever.

He glared down at the shriveled face of the old hag before him. "Your niece is going to be my wife in a matter of hours. She will outrank you, and my children will outrank you. You will not stand in the way of my wife and her brother gaining their inheritance. You will replace any and all funds you have removed from her accounts, including the allowances you stole from the time you removed her from her home in Naples. Is this understood?" Ren didn't bother waiting for a reply. He could tell by the growing anger in the old woman's face that she understood his less than perfect Italian. "If you ever so much as breathe a negative comment about my wife, I will ruin you. You are fortunate we do not go to the authorities with the truth. For you will be facing charges of attempting to murder my future wife and her brother."

Lia looked at him and asked, "Maura?"

"I never touched her," the aunt hissed at Lia. "You have no proof that the boy's nurse did not die a natural death."

"But I have a witness to what happened here today," he continued in a barely controlled voice. "Since your daughter was weak enough to agree to your hair-brained scheme, she deserves whatever ostracism she faces in the years to come." He began to pace the length of the room. "In all my years, I have never hit a woman no matter the circumstance. But you, Contessa, might just be the first if you don't get out of my life. Now you can either walk out that door, or I can throw you out that window." He pointed at the wall of tall windows that faced the front of the building. "The choice is yours."

The old woman's stare was hard and angry as she looked from he to Lia and back. She turned to leave, but not before pointing at Lia and cursing her one more time, before quitting the room.

"*Tu veramente sei una puttana opportunistica!*"

"*Guardare ti specchio*," Lia hissed.

If it were possible, the old woman turned even more red. Her back stiffened as she motioned for her daughter to follow. The girl passed by the doorway, clutching her cloak about her once again, still

crying.

Ren looked at Lia. He was already exhausted from the day's events. He pulled out the chair at the small writing desk and lowered his body into it. Dropping his head between his hands, he rubbed his eyes. "That didn't sound like an apology. What did she say?"

"She called me an opportunistic whore."

"And what did you reply?"

"I told her to look in a mirror."

He chuckled at Lia's quick-witted retort. "You were right. She truly is evil."

Looking up to his rescuer, who stood with her hair still wrapped in a thin cotton towel, Ren said, "Thank you. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't witnessed the girl's actions."

"I saw nothing." She pulled the towel from her head, allowing her wet hair to cascade about her shoulders.

He stared at her, amazed and grateful for her assistance. "Then how did you know?"

Lia returned his steady gaze. "Don't you think it odd that my aunt and her housekeeper arrived before anyone had gone for them? I told you to beware of her. I warned you."

Ren wearily rubbed his eyes. "You are right. Everything happened so quickly." He glanced up at her again. "You made assumptions. But, what if you had been wrong?"

"I know my aunt, and what she is capable of. As much as I may dislike the situation I am in, I could never bring myself to do the wicked, evil deeds she does." She turned and walked toward the door, only his words stopped her from leaving.

"You would run away instead, breaking your word and jeopardizing your brother's health."

Her green-eyed gaze was filled with angry slivers of gold as she said, "After overhearing your words yesterday, I had nothing to lose."

He owed her an explanation. But now was not the time, as the priest from the local church was due soon. He didn't know what she'd overheard yesterday, but evidently she thought him insincere in his urgent need for a wife and an heir. Whatever it was, it motivated her attempted escape last night.

Just then Flynn walked in carrying a large package in his arms. He handed it to Lia, who turned to Ren curiously.

"There's more downstairs," Flynn said. "Shall I have it all sent to the ship?"

"Yes, and did you get the other I asked for?"

He patted his pocket. "Of course."

"Thank you. Send someone for Cully and the boy."

Lia looked at him, steadily. "I will not marry you."

He took a slow, deep breath to calm himself. She was trying his patience. "You will," he replied, staring at her immobile form.

"I will not marry you," she said, her fists clenched before her, her expression so tense he felt the anger coming off her. "I will not marry you until you promise never to separate me from my children."

"You will," he said. "Remember the bargain, Lia. Your brother for my heir." Ren removed the gold watch from his pocket and popped open the cover. "Now go and prepare yourself. The priest will arrive shortly, and the papers needing our signatures await us below." He snapped the lid shut and replaced it in the pocket of his waistcoat.

"And if I do not?"

"Don't defy me Lia. I have had enough today. If you aren't ready when I come across for you, you will be married in whatever you are, or are not, wearing at the time."

Her eyes narrowed as her lips grew taught. Ren thought he saw the muscle in her cheek twitch before she turned and left the room.

Lia struggled with the tiny buttons on the back of the pale yellow dress when a light rap sounded at her door. "Go away!" she shouted. The person on the other side knocked again, this time a little harder. With a look on her face she was sure reflected her mood, she swung the door open expecting to find Ren on the other side. Instead, she found the maid, Ghita, black-eyed and with a swollen bruise on her jaw.

Shame washed over Lia at the sight of the young woman's pain. If she could turn back time, she would never have asked the girl for help.

"His Grace says you have three minutes to get to the front parlor downstairs or he will come for you himself," the maid said.

"*Sta cornuto*," Lia muttered. "He thinks the world revolves around him. Well, it doesn't! How did he think I would get into this impossible dress?"

"I'll do the rest of your buttons, my lady," Ghita offered.

She turned and let the maid finish dressing her. Ghita then began to comb the tangles from Lia's hair and styled the wavy mass up and fastened it with several pins before adding the small, matching veil over her head. The maid then placed the slippers on the floor and Lia stepped into them.

Ghita looked over Lia's gown with wide eyes. "You are very beautiful, my lady. Your man is very fortunate to have you for his bride."

"Tell him that." Lia took a deep breath. When she was ready, she opened the door, walked down the steps and into the front parlor, where the maid said Ren waited. Luchino stood next to Ren wearing a

set of new clothing and shoes. When the boy recognized her, he ran across the room and into Lia's open arms. She pushed him back so she could inspect him.

"Luchino, how are you? Are they treating you well?"

"Lia, Lia. You should see! I have my own room on the ship and new clothes and shoes. The cook is my friend now, and so is *Signore* Cully. I'm going to be a captain of a ship one day. It's so much fun!"

Finally the boy stopped for a breath. Lia hugged him close once more, and he pulled away. "I can't play with girls anymore. I'm a little man now. *Signore* Cully said so."

"Yes, I see you are." Lia looked up to Ren with grateful eyes, thanking him for her brother's life.

"Come, Lia," Ren said, "our fate awaits." They signed the license and church register with the priest and innkeeper as witnesses. She straightened and slowly stepped toward Ren. He wore a pristine white shirt tucked into black breeches that fit his well-muscled thighs to perfection. Over that, he wore a double-breasted dress coat with large lapels, coming to just below his waist. It, too, fit him perfectly, as though tailored onto him.

His face bore an impatient expression as his cool silver eyes focused on her. If he thought staring daggers at her would hurry her along, he had much to learn about her. She turned away from his gaze to smile warmly at the young, dark-haired priest who stood next to Ren.

"*Buon giorno, padre,*" she said softly.

The priest returned her greeting. "Are you ready to proceed?"

"I am not given a choice in the matter," she replied.

Ren turned to the priest. "Father, as I told you earlier, she's not thinking clearly. There is the possibility she carries my child as we speak, so time is of the essence."

The priest turned to Lia. "Is this true?"

Afraid of seeing the disappointment in the priest's eyes, she lowered her gaze and nodded.

She felt Ren's burning glare, as he said to the priest. "Please begin."

In the front parlor of the inn, with several of Ren's men and Luchino as witness, she and the Englishman became man and wife. Lia didn't remember much of it, except that she responded appropriately when asked if she would have Marcus Renfield Sewell Halden, ninth Duke of Caversham, as her husband for the rest of her life.

How could she not answer in the affirmative when he glared down at her, trying to intimidate her as he did? As His Grace placed a thin gold band on the third finger of her left hand, a strange, warm tingling traveled slowly up her arm and through her body, to settle in

her belly. The rational part of her knew it was just Ren's touch that caused the strange sensation, not the piece of gold around her finger.

She tried to pull her hand away from his, but he held her fast, probably afraid she might flee with her brother again. After the priest signed his name to the license and blew sand over the ink, he rolled it and handed it to Ren, who had to let her hand go, in order to give the priest a leather pouch. He tucked the rolled parchment under his arm and began to issue orders to his men.

The priest opened the pouch and peered inside. "*Santa Maria!*" His brown eyes went wide with shock at the amount of coin in the bag. "Your Grace, you are indeed very generous. This is more gold than my small church sees in a year's time!"

Ren pulled Lia next to him, putting his arm around her. "Consider it our gift to your parish for the service you did for us this day."

"There are many families who will benefit from your unselfish donation, Your Grace. *Mille grazie.*" With that, the priest left.

Lia glimpsed Ghita standing in the doorway, watching tears falling from the maid's eyes. The innkeeper's wife shouted at her, ordering her to get busy cleaning the rooms upstairs. Feeling responsible for the other girl's condition, Lia had an idea.

She hugged her brother one last time before he left with Cully. It seemed Ren had assigned Luchino to be in Cully's charge, and the little boy was ecstatic at the idea of following a ship captain around.

After her brother was out of sight, Lia turned to Ren. "May I have a word with you, Your Grace?"

One black brow arched up curiously. "Yes?"

"I was thinking," Lia said, "that I will be in need of a ladies' maid. Will I not?"

"Not any time soon."

Lia turned and worried her lower lip. There really was no other way around it. She'd just have to ask him. Turning back she stared into his hard eyes, all the while hating the position he'd placed her in. "Can I please hire the girl, Ghita, as my maid?" When he didn't respond, she continued. "I feel responsible for what happened to her. No woman deserves to be beaten, whether she be low born or not."

"As you said, you are responsible for the punishment meted out to her this morn."

Her face burned with shame. She lowered her gaze. "And I would now correct that wrong by offering her a position in my employ. With me, she would never have to worry about being struck again."

"No."

Lia always did have a difficult time feigning meekness. "As the wife of a duke, will I not require someone to attend me?"

"You will. Once we arrive in England."

“All right then. I would request that my ladies’ maid be someone I trust. Someone I can communicate with in my native tongue.”

“She is also someone who has helped you escape me once. How could I ever trust her? Besides, you speak English well enough.” He moved closer and stroked her cheek with his knuckles. “And with a very captivating accent.”

He attempted to distract her, so she turned from his touch, intent on helping the maid. “But....”

“My answer is no.” Ren took her by the arm and led her from the room. “Come, Lia. We sail with the evening tide, and we have a stop to make.”

They crossed the lobby of the inn and she saw the innkeeper’s wife again strike Ghita as the old woman scolded the maid for something. Lia tugged against Ren’s grip, wanting to do something to help the girl.

He tightened his grip on her arm, and pushed her toward the door right as they all heard a scream and a crash. Lia turned to see the maid fall, along with the buckets she carried, spilling water on the inn’s wooden floors. The innkeeper’s wife kicked at her, and the maid cringed, trying to move away from the old woman’s booted foot.

Lia turned to him and pleaded for the girl’s safety one more time. “Please, Ren, please! I promise I’ll never run from you again. Just save the girl from this place. Even if she does not come with me.”

He led her out of the inn and onto the sidewalk, where Cully and Luchino waited. “Go to your brother and stand with him.” He motioned to Captain Cully, and watched her closely as he spoke in low tones with him. When he was done, Ren led Lia to the carriage that waited to carry them to the docks.

“Aren’t my brother and your man coming with us?”

“Cully needs to see to the removal of our belongings before he meets up with us on the pier.”

“But what about...?”

With a look he quieted her. And she turned away from him and kissed her brother, promising to see him later. They made one stop in the business district where she and her new husband visited with the guardian of her trust with proof of their marriage. Ren then gave the man the address in London of the bank in which he wanted the funds transferred. Upon their return to the carriage, the rest of the short ride to the docks was done in complete silence.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ren ushered her into his cabin on *Warlock*, locking the door behind them. Once in the room, Lia darted to the other side of the table, thinking she was safe from his reach.

"How could you?" she hissed.

"How could I what?"

"Leave that poor girl there and not help her! How cruel can you be? What kind of gentleman are you?"

He turned away from her. "Do not cross me this early into our marriage, wife." He stripped away his coat and tossed it onto the chair. He sat on the edge of the bed and removed his shiny, black boots, dropping them to the floor. Standing, he began to loosen his cravat and pull his shirt from the waistband of his breeches. "As to my ungentlemanly behavior—well, I've never been accused of being a gentleman, so I'd say my behavior was quite the norm."

She watched him remove his shirt and cravat, letting them fall beside the bed. When he stood and began to unbutton his breeches, she asked, "What are you doing?"

"Getting ready for bed," he told her. "So should you."

"It's broad daylight out." Her knuckles turned white as her grasp on the edge of the table tightened and her breathing got deeper and faster.

"When has that stopped us before?" Then he had a thought, and his heart stopped a moment. "Don't tell me that now we are wed, you've grown cold on me? I'll not put up with it."

"You ask if I have changed in the short time since the vows were spoken, but it is not *I* who is behaving abominably! What has come over you?" She stood her ground behind the table, out of his reach, and refused to undress. "You have become *un diavolo*. You separate me from my brother, and...."

"There are some who say I have always been evil," he said, stepping closer. He watched the lump in her throat rise and fall as she gulped and retreated a step.

"Why do you act this way to me now?" Her voice trembled as she spoke. "Is it because of what I did last night?" Her eyes scanned over the room for another safe haven, but there was none.

"Yes, and no. I see it in your eyes Lia." Ren reached out and stroked her cheek with a feather-light touch, which she knew hid his true emotion. "Even now, you look for a way out. Like a frightened animal. Why? What have I done to you besides give you the safety and comfort that comes with my name? I would think you'd be grateful

that I brought you to Genoa to save your brother. But what do I get in return for his spared life? You try to escape me.” His fingers wound their way into the silky hair at her nape, forcing her closer. She was soon in his arms, and he could feel her tremble. “And I cannot think of a reason why. I fulfilled my end of the bargain.”

His lips came down on hers heavily. He wanted to both punish and cherish her at the same time, but she wanted nothing from him. She didn’t move, didn’t respond. Grabbing her head, he slid his fingers into her coiffure, holding her steady while he tried to coax her to passion. One by one, he removed all the pins from her hair, dropping them to the floor, freeing her waist length mahogany waves. When she didn’t return the kiss, he backed away from her passionless stance and said, “Until we arrived here it seemed as though you were amenable to keeping your end of our agreement.”

Then he shook his head as he realized her game, and gave a disgusted half laugh when he understood he’d once again been duped. “Unless, of course, it was all an act.” She flinched and looked away. “That’s it, isn’t it? You were pretending to enjoy my touch. You were pretending so that I would agree to save your brother.” He walked away from her, stepping to the bank of windows and staring out into the Genoan harbor. “Seems I’ve been played a fool yet again. This time all the way to the altar.” He turned to her and saluted her. “Congratulations, Your Grace, the whoremaster trained you well,” was all he said.

“No” she whispered, shaking her head slowly. He saw a tear, then two, then more trickle down her face, falling unchecked. “I never...”

He went back to her. “Oh, I think so. And you know who is the biggest fool, Lia?” Again she shook her head. He stood directly in front of her now, and he reached for her, grabbing her about the waist and drawing her close. “I am. Because I felt something—an attraction maybe, the day you ran from the guard in the souk.” He stroked the hair at her temple, fighting the urge to kiss her, because to do so would only make him a boor. “The night we met in the palace garden, I wanted you to be different. From that night I wanted you to enjoy sharing my bed.” Lia pulled away from him, and opened her mouth, but he cut her off instantly. “Don’t bother. I will never again believe a word you say.”

She straightened, and wiped her face, saying “You accuse me of using you to get my brother back, but can you honestly tell me, that you did not plan to use me as well?” He quirked a brow wondering what she spoke about, when she added, “I heard you say as much.” He looked at her curiously. “Yesterday afternoon, when you spoke with your men in the room across from mine. You told them you would send me back to Italy after I presented you with your much-needed

heir.

"I entered the agreement in good faith, Your Grace. *I* never intended deception. *You* did. All along you intended deception. Because it wasn't a partner you wanted in this marriage. It was a 'broodmare' on which to beget your heir. When I think back to the sincere gratitude with which I agreed to the bargain, I feel ill. Because all along *you* were the one who intended to unload me as some insignificant baggage after you got what you wanted. I have to ask, Your Grace, were you going to have me killed, too? Because you must know how much I love my brother. Did you think I would so easily walk away from my own *child*?"

"Lia, you tread dangerous water. Careful what you say." He reached out for her, but she jerked her arm from him.

"No. I never asked to be abducted. I never asked for you to purchase me. I never asked for any of this. All I ever wanted was to live in peace, raising my brother as my parents would have wished. I had dreams of someday marrying a man who loved me as my father loved my mother.

"But fate had other plans for me, Your Grace. What you see as my attempt to escape you, was me doing everything in my power to get back to that place in my life where I could control my destiny. For that I am to be punished for the rest of my life?"

She wiped her tears, and Ren reached for her again, and she backed further away from him, wanting nothing to do with him.

"I never asked for you to purchase me. If I had been unsuccessful in rescuing Luchino, it would have been because I had died trying. Then he and I would have been together, along with with our parents, in heaven."

She turned away from him. Guilt overcame him as he realized what he'd done. Because if he had done as he originally intended, he would have returned her to her family untouched. But the attraction to her, the intense need he felt to possess and keep her, cherish her and protect her, took over and he'd been unable to let her go. He stood silent for several long moments before finally speaking again. And when he did, she seemed surprised at what he said.

"I am sorry."

Her eyes grew wide and hopeful. "If you truly are, then tear up the marriage certificate and allow my brother and me to remain here. I have friends in Naples, and my mother's family in Rome. We will make a new life for ourselves. I can find work...."

"That is impossible," he interjected.

"Why?"

"Because, as I told the priest earlier, you could already carry my child."

"I will *never* allow you to take my child from me," Lia said.

"Regardless of what transpired in the past twenty-four hours, the bargain remains in effect."

"Why are you doing this? Can you not see the futility of such a scheme? We would never suit. You want a wife to beget heirs upon. I wish to be my husband's equal, *con pari dignita*." She took a deep, slow breath and shook her head. "Will you swear to me that you will never separate me from my child? I warn you now, if I suspect you think to take my child away from me, I would leave you first, taking my child with me."

"Lia, you are in no position to make demands. We entered into an agreement, and now a marriage. In any court of law, as your husband I am now the legal guardian of your brother, and the father of any babe you conceive. You would never get custody of either should you try to leave."

His voice grew more and more deadly with each word he spoke. "And know this, if you ever attempt to flee, I *will* hunt you down."

She slapped him. "*Bastardo!*"

With a lightning quickness, he grabbed her, pulling her closer. Leaning back, he glared down at her. "I hate to disappoint you, but I look just like my father."

Cursing him, Lia called him every foul name in English and Italian that she could think of. "I don't care if your conception had witnesses. You're still a...."

He jerked her closer, and kissed her. A hard, punishing kiss that was not meant to arouse, but to stop her from hurling those poisonous barbs at him as though she were the only one in the room with feelings. "*You* ran away. You would have left, probably carrying my child, to live on the street somewhere?" He stroked the column of her neck, then cupped the back of her head. "My child," he growled. "You would have kept my child from me. And that would make you no better than her."

"I'll never allow you to take my child," she repeated, pushing away from him and ducking under his arm, putting some needed distance between them. "I do not know who *she* was, and I don't care. But, unless you threatened to take her child from her against her wishes, she and I have nothing in common."

Ren straightened and strode to the door of the cabin. Turning back, he gave her a frozen glare and left the room, locking the door behind him.

Her husband didn't return to their cabin that night. The next morning she waited for his arrival, which never came. Not that it mattered, unless he promised he would never separate her from her

children, she would have nothing to do with him ever again.

If she were to leave him, it would be easier with the inheritance as a means of supporting herself and her brother. But the man could have it. Before marrying the Englishman she stood little chance of getting it from her aunt anyway. Lia had resigned herself long ago to surviving without the money. She just needed to go find her mother's family in Rome.

His second, Angus, appeared carrying a breakfast tray, behind him was a lad with a pitcher of fresh water for washing, and behind them two more men carrying a trunk she'd never seen before.

"These are the clothes from the Italian seamstress," the older man said.

She thanked the men, and listened as the door was again locked from the outside.

Lifting the lid to the tray, she saw fish, fruit and bread, and dove into the meal with gusto. The Englishman who was her husband hadn't seen fit to send her a dinner tray the night before and she was famished. Once done with the meal, she washed and changed clothes from the dress she married in to another, less embellished, frock. She paced the perimeter of the cabin, unsure of what to do. She wanted to go above deck, but the door was locked. Glancing at the limited selection of books in his bookcase, she drew one down, taking the bench seat beneath the windows and began to read.

This was how her husband found her several hours later. Upon entering the room, he stood between the door and table staring at her. Lia could have sworn he wanted to say something. But he didn't. Instead, he turned and stalked from the cabin after he took a chart from the bench and tucked it under his arm. This time, she didn't hear the key turn the lock as he left.

Leaning back in the chair, she thought about this man she was now to call husband. It seemed his emotions changed each time she saw him. Yesterday he hated her. Today he was seemingly remorseful. Why? All night long, she thought about his accusations.

He said she used him.

Admittedly, it had been wrong of her to run away the other night when she should have confronted him with what she'd heard, so she could see where he might come to that conclusion. But he was using her as well, to bear him an heir. Which was worse?

He planned to use her body and discard her once he got what he wanted. His intentions toward her were more despicable. His was the more grievous wrong committed. Except to his convoluted male mind, he probably didn't think of it that way. She didn't see any common ground with which to begin discussion.

Her eyes fell to the thin gold band on her finger. The symbol of

the sacrament and vows taken yesterday afternoon was the only thing they shared.

Suddenly a vision of the young priest, with his straight, dark hair and soft, brown eyes stood before her saying “*Repeat after me...from this day forward. For better or for worse...*”

Surely this wasn't what God intended a marriage should be. Her father never treated her mother roughly or spoke to her with the venomous tongue Ren used with her last night.

“*...from this day forward.*” There was no pleasant future in sight for her, that much was sure. So was she now to live out her days in a loveless relationship with nothing to look forward to? Living in fear of her husband sending her away?

Another vision appeared, and she closed her eyes tight so she would not have to look at it, but still it was there. She saw Maysun cradling an infant, her face radiant with maternal bliss. In this vision her friend repeated the words she'd told her when she woke up in the harem. “*You can be as happy as you allow yourself to be. Your fate lies in your own hands.*”

“*...from this day forward,*” echoed the vision of the young priest.

Her happiness was within her own control, as Maysun had told her. She had to talk with her new husband. If she could make peace with him, it might make living with him more bearable. He might never love her, and she might never love him, but she could not continue with the way things were.

When the cabin was near dark, she heard a knock at the door. Lia stood, faced the door, and called out for whomever it was to enter.

“It's Angus, Yer Grace, come to bring ye a dinner tray.” The door opened slowly and the stout, gray-haired Scotsman entered carrying a tray. Angus placed the fresh tray on the table, and lit the room's only lantern, then picked up the remains from her previous meal.

“The weather might get a bit choppy tonight, so ye might want to eat now as there'll be no meal cooked after this one.”

She nodded at him, and the old salt left the cabin. Peeking under the cover of her meal she set it aside and settled in with a book as the weather began to worsen.

Bracing his legs, Ren guided the ship's bow into a wave, cutting it in half. He wanted to go below to speak with Lia, but the weather had taken a turn. The storm he thought he might skirt became something he had to face directly. His new wife had to wait. The approaching squall line needed his attention. He had three ships full of cargo and ninety-six men he wanted to bring home to England alive.

For the next six hours, he held a steady westerly course through the Mediterranean, fighting a hard north wind and waves that crashed

against the starboard side of his lead ship. The stinging drops pelted his exposed flesh, feeling much like the lash of the cat. He deserved every strike for the pain he caused her because the entire predicament they were in was his fault. No one else's but his, and he owed her an apology.

Lia set the tray in the corner of the railed table and looked for something heavy to place around it so it wouldn't slide around. She spied several, large books on the bookshelf and carefully laid them around the platter, filling the desk's surface.

She wondered if these classical tomes were Ren's, and if he had read them. There were works from Aristotle and Plutarch in Latin, Shakespeare, and a Bible. He also had books on architecture, agriculture and business, even some of the more current works from the popular poets, such as Goethe, Keats and Byron. She picked one up and carried it with her to the bed.

The ship began to pitch more violently now as the vessel moved deeper into the storm. Lightning streaked across the night sky a fraction of a moment before the accompanying thunder clap reverberated through her body. Giving up on the book, she blew out the flame in the swaying lantern just as another wave threw her to the floor. Lia crawled the rest of the way to the bed, where she wrapped herself in a blanket and waited for it all to be over. As she huddled there under the covers, she worried about her brother on *Sea Witch*, wondering if he were frightened by the storm. She prayed for his safety, and that of her husband and all his men. She prayed for the souls of her parents and Maura, and lastly, she prayed for her own.

Several hours later she was holding on for dear life to a table leg fixed to the floor when she felt the sway and pitch of the ship lessen, and within minutes, return to normal. She scurried to the bank of windows and looked up at the night sky.

Stars. Millions of little dots twinkling in the velvety-dark heavens above. They'd made it through the storm. This ship, and the two behind them. She hoped her brother was well on the other ship, and not frightened. Saying a prayer of thanks that they all had cleared the bad weather, Lia climbed onto the bed and wrapped the cotton blanket tighter around her, exhausted now that the threat of danger was over.

She lay on her side, drew her knees up, and nodded off, lightly dozing an indeterminate amount of time before the sound of the door opening woke her. Ren entered the room. Lia feigned sleep to keep his attention from her, afraid they might argue again. She heard him move about the room, then felt the mattress dip when he climbed on. He gathered her into his arms, and held her close. It was difficult to

sleep with his scent and warmth enveloping her. What she really wanted was to turn into him and thank him for seeing them through the storm. But she was afraid that any words might be heard as angry and condemning, then they would find themselves back in the heat of a shouting match. And she truly was tired of fighting.

A few moments later, she heard the even breathing that told her he slept, and only then could she relax enough to get real sleep.

The eerie light of the full moon off the water, reflected in the cabin, created a faint blue glow in the room. Turning over to face Lia, Ren heard her deep, even breaths through her parted lips, and watched the rise and fall of her chest, covered only by her thin chemise, leaving the blanket twisted about her waist.

He'd been warned that Lia was spirited. But she was also brave, strong-willed, stubborn, vivacious, expressive, and... honest. Just days ago she'd enthusiastically thrown her naked body into his, happy to be so close to rescuing her brother. That emotion was as genuine as she was. How could he believe Lia was cut of the same cloth as Margaret? That devious wench had played the innocent miss, pretending to want marriage to him, all the while she'd been having an affair with his cousin, Thomas, and conceiving his child. Ren thanked the fates that he'd been spared a marriage to her because he likely would never have known until it was too late.

But Lia was different. How could this slip of a girl, willful though she may be, evoke such emotion in him? In sleep, she appeared an innocent angel. Her long, dark lashes cast shadows on her cheeks. How well he knew the unique shade of green hiding behind those lids. It had haunted his every waking moment from the first time he saw her.

It wasn't going to be easy, but he had to apologize to her. At least he had to if he wanted again what they'd shared before.

The next morning, Ren returned to the cabin after he'd breakfasted, heard the damage reports, and checked their coordinates and speed. He found the books had been put away, and Lia sitting in a chair under the open windows, an open book of poetry in her hands. She stood immediately and closed her book.

How was he going to open a conversation with her? How could he tell her he was truly sorry for what he'd done? He sat on the edge of the bed, unable to look at her. With his elbows on his knees, he dropped his head in his hands and covered his eyes, wondering where to begin. Lia spoke first, relieving him of his ice-breaking burden.

"Thank you for saving us last night," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded, still unable to meet her direct gaze or speak the

words he wanted so much to say. Instead, he said, "Lia, I wish to apologize for my behavior."

"It is forgiven."

His head snapped up, shocked that she would so readily forgive when he'd behaved so boorishly. "Why?"

"I've had a lot of time alone here. Time to think. I know my actions were partially to blame for your anger." She lifted her eyes to his. "But, Your Grace, there is much I do not understand."

He nodded. "Myself as well. I've never been in this situation before, so we both are treading new ground here. My head tells me I've made a horrendous mistake in forcing you to remain with me but," he looked away and heaved an exhausted sigh. "I can't let you go."

"Seeing as we are now bound eternally," Lia said, "I would that we have an amiable relationship."

Ren stood and paced the expanse of the small cabin, he glanced at her and nodded, agreeing with her assessment for the future, but still he needed to explain. "You see, a part of me knew this wouldn't work," he said. "I was admittedly taken by your looks, so much so that I was willing to hope you might...." He pinched the bridge of his nose, hoping to stop the headache that was building. "They do things differently in Morocco, and I cannot blame my friends for talking me into keeping you." He met her gaze directly, hoping she might see the remorse in his heart. "In actuality the decision was, and always had been, mine."

"I see."

He held up his hand to silence her, wanting to complete his thought. "I don't think you do. Please, hear me out."

Lia leaned against the carved head of the bed, and took a deep breath. She lifted her gaze to meet his, signaling him to continue. He asked her a few questions to see what she remembered. Upon realizing she had virtually no recollection of anything prior to waking in the harem, he decided to fill her in about their first "meeting," the events which followed, and his reasons for doing what he did.

"Thank you for caring," she said. "Not very many people would involve themselves in something so dangerous."

He nodded, accepting her gratitude. He began to pace the width of the cabin, trying to find the courage to continue, worried he was just going to anger her as he had before.

"The night you were released from the harem, when you appeared educated and refined enough to pass as.... as.... a proper wife to someone like myself, and you said you were a gentleman's daughter, and that you had a brother.... Well, that's when I conceived our *arrangement*. Regardless of what you believed, or heard, I never

intended anything other than marriage, as it is the only way to have an heir whose legitimacy will never be questioned.”

He stood again and walked to the bank of windows and stared at the watery horizon.

“The reasons I purchased you and married you are still the same. I need an heir, and yes, I considered sending you back to your country after you gave me that heir. But that was only if we did not get along.” He stopped at an open window and sighed. He searched her face for understanding, forgiveness, and thought he saw a glimpse of something to grasp and nurture. “There are moments when I think there is a spark of something that a relationship might be built upon.

“What I did was wrong. Never, in any of this plotting, did I consider your feelings, or think that I might come to care about...” Ren broke off unable to continue, wondering what she was thinking. When she said nothing he turned to continue staring out the window. Willing to turn the boats around and head back to Italy if she asked.

Lia came to stand next to him at the bank of windows. “I keep thinking about something Maysun told me when we were in the harem.” He felt her hand on his back, and the warmth of her heart seeped into his skin to soothe his troubled soul. Her touch was a balm to him. Her forgiveness could heal him. “She told me that I could be as happy as I allowed myself to be.” He couldn’t respond, still somewhat afraid of what she might say. “I have accepted my fate because now I have made a vow before God, albeit unwillingly, to have you as my husband.

“I know you do not love me, but is it possible for us to live out our days in a companionable partnership? I will bear your heir and any other children you wish. Just don’t take them from me. Because even though they are yet to be born, I know I will love them.”

He swallowed past the lump in his throat, turned, nodded and quickly left the room.

CHAPTER TWELVE

That afternoon, as Lia tied the end of her braid with the leather strap, there was a knock on the cabin door. Rising from the chair, she pulled up the neckline of her dress, uncomfortable at having so much of her chest exposed, and smoothed the wrinkles from the mint green muslin with her hands. She opened the door to find the wrinkled and weathered face of Angus. His hazel eyes softened, and he smiled. Lia hoped it was a sign that all was well above deck.

"I've returned to fetch yer tray, and to tell ye that the lad says he'll be takin' ye above deck for a stroll in a bit. The sunshine and fresh air will do ye good." He collected her tray and mug. "It's not right for a person to be cooped up, never gettin' any sunshine. I said as much to him, and this time I seem to ha' got through."

The old man left the cabin, and Lia wondered about him. He openly called her husband 'the lad' or used his Christian name, both of which told her he had some relationship or influence over her new husband, even if it was minor. She considered it a blessing to have someone aboard this vessel who was sympathetic to her desires for fresh air and sunshine, and said a quick prayer of thanks.

She didn't have time to consider the gray-haired Angus long, because her husband soon opened the door and stood in the entryway. Their eyes met, and his warmed to a molten silver as his gaze caressed her body from head to toe. He smiled a slow, lazy grin that sent a shiver coursing through her body. He'd had the same look in his eyes once before—in the palace, the night he took her to his bed for the first time.

"I thought you might like to take a stroll above," he said, his voice soft and deep. "The weather is fine and *Sea Witch* is just off the port side. She's probably close enough to see your brother making mischief on deck."

"Really? How is he?" She ran to the trunk and grabbed the light shawl draped over the lid. Wrapping it about her shoulders, she nearly knocked Ren over in her rush to get topside. She chattered nervously as she practically ran up the gangway stairs. "I was afraid for him last night, weathering the storm all alone. I'd wanted to ask you about him, but...."

Up on deck, the brilliant sunshine blinded her. She squinted, shading her eyes with her hand. After being in the cabin for two full days, her eyes took a while to adjust to the direct light. Ren took her hand as he led her the rest of the way to the port rail on the main deck. He pointed out Luchino next to the forward mast. Her brother

was seated on a stool working on something she couldn't identify.

"If I know Cully, he's got the lad practicing knots," Ren explained. "He says the boy wants to be a sailor."

Lia looked up at Ren, her expression serious, "Oh, no. I have other plans for him. Luchino will go to a university and make something of his life."

"Of course he will," Ren said. "But don't deny the boy his dreams. He's still very young."

She smiled as she watched her brother attentively work rope in his hands. A wave sent her back into Ren's chest, and as she moved to distance herself, his arm kept her in place. Her brother lost his seat when the same wave hit *Sea Witch* then scrambled to regain it.

She tilted her head back to look up at him. "My brother doesn't swim well. I'm concerned for his safety."

"Cully is keeping a close eye on him—which in itself is a tedious job. Your brother has a tendency toward mischief I hear."

Lia smiled at Ren, remembering what a handful Luchino had been back in Naples before their parents' death. "He hasn't had much laughter in his life since Mama and Papa died. It was difficult to keep his mood up during the time we were in Genoa. My cousin Ugo is much older than Luchino, and teased him mercilessly. My brother's spirit had been beaten so low that he rarely left the nursery without me or Maura at his side."

"The boy's doing fine over there." Ren nodded his head toward *Sea Witch*, "With Cully and his crew. The men have taken to calling him Lucky because very few can pronounce his name."

"Maybe Luchino's English will improve, since he is immersed with a crew that doesn't speak Italian."

"Cully is able to understand your brother well enough. The other men likely have a harder time."

Just then the two ships pulled within shouting distance and Ren whistled a high piercing sound, causing Lia to put her hands over her ears. Cully and another man came to their starboard rail.

"Get the boy," he shouted to the men on the other ship.

Before long, her brother stood at the rail and waved to her. Then he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Are you having as much fun as I am?"

"Oh, yes! Why just this morning I read another book of poetry."

"Yuk! I climbed part way up the main mast yesterday before the storm." Her brother pointed at the tallest center mast. "I would have gone all the way up, but someone stopped me."

Lia's heart fell into her stomach. So much for Cully watching her brother. She made herself a promise that if they made it to England safely, she would never let him get into anything even remotely

dangerous again.

“Be careful, Luchino!”

“I will, I will,” the boy replied.

Her brother turned and went back to his post near the forward mast, where he continued practicing his knots.

“Please take care of him,” she said to Cully as the two ships pulled further apart.

The other captain bowed, and shouted, “My men and I are doin’ our best to keep Lucky safe, Your Grace.”

She turned a curious green-eyed gaze to Ren. “Why do they address you? He’s my brother, the man can speak to me.”

He chuckled and said, “He was speaking to you, Your Grace.” Awareness dawned, turning her cheeks that endearing shade of pink. “You will grow accustomed to your new title, wife, hopefully before we arrive in England.”

Ren guided her away from the rail and led her up into the rear of the ship, where she leaned against the railing of the wheel deck. He dismissed the helmsman and took the wheel. Lia looked around and saw that they were alone.

Ren held a hand out to her. Sensing he needed something from her to move forward in their unconventional relationship, she slowly, almost hesitantly, placed her hand into it. He brought her close, positioning her in front of him, between his body and the wheel. With this man, Lia felt a deep sense of security she hadn’t had in nearly a year. A wave rocked the boat and before she fell forward and hit the wheel with her body, Ren’s arm wrapped around her again, holding her steady. She held onto his forearm, and after the wave passed, she lifted his left hand off her waist and studied it closely. Dry patches and calluses dotted his palm at the base of the fingers, and up toward their tips. She rubbed her fingertips over them softly, as if committing the feel of the rough spots to memory.

“How did you get these?” she asked.

“From holding the wheel. It can get difficult to manage during a storm.”

“Like last night?”

“Yes.”

She rested against him in silence for a while, relishing the tenuous truce they’d come to.

He took his hand from hers and rested the broad palm flat against her lower belly, pulling her close, holding her possessively. She closed her eyes, and drew a deep, nervous breath, as her body reacted to his closeness. Her womb clenched beneath his warm palm, and she felt her core grow moist. Her breasts ached for his touch. And she wasn’t the only one becoming aroused, she thought, as she felt his swelling

manhood pressing into her low back.

With one arm holding her securely and the other on the wheel, her new husband lowered his face into her hair. She heard him slowly breathe in, felt his chest expand, then the distinct sensation of him pressing his lips on her head.

"You smell like sunshine on the ocean," he whispered.

She chuckled, saying nothing.

"What makes you laugh?"

"You," she replied. "I do not understand how I can smell of sunshine when I've been cooped up in a cabin for two days."

"Then I must do better at bringing you above for more fresh air."

She turned in his arms, and stared at his parted lips as he spoke, longing to feel them over hers, wanting to know again the exquisite fulfillment he could give her. Before the ordeal in Genoa, sex was a passionate, glorious giving and taking between them, and had been from the first night. She wanted those feelings again. That passion. That hunger for him. She needed them.

Her tongue slid across her lips in silent invitation. He looked up at the sails a moment before lowering his head and covering her mouth with his.

His lips were firm, yet tender as he parted hers with his hot, wet tongue. She opened for him, and he plundered her depths like a man starved. Lia melted into him as burning desire coursed through her with his kiss. Her tongue tentatively touched his, and he crushed her to him. One hand slid over her back as the other still held the wheel. His arousal pressed into her belly creating a desperate need for him inside her. If she were to ask him to take her to the cabin, would it appear too forward? Would he like that?

Her tongue slid into his mouth and she tasted the sweetness of him. She explored the sharp edges of his teeth as they continued their intimate dueling. Her hands held onto his collar for stability as a wave crashed into the side of the ship, knocking them both off balance, forcing them to break apart.

"Let's take this to the cabin," Ren whispered huskily.

Lia nodded, and he motioned for his helmsman. Soon he was leading her back down to the main deck where he stopped to talk to Angus. Her lips still felt swollen from Ren's kisses, and she self-consciously touched her fingers to them as she listened to Ren's orders.

"Send a tray down immediately, and unless this vessel is on fire and you can't put it out, we are not to be disturbed."

"Aye," said a grinning Angus.

Lia caught a glimpse of the old sailor as he passed a wink to Ren. She was sure Angus was pleased that all was well between them.

Ren led her back down the narrow stairwell to their cabin. He locked the door, then leaned against the table, bringing Lia back into his arms. He kissed her more, his hands roaming possessively over the small of her back and down to cup her bottom. Tearing his lips from hers, he nuzzled the sensitive, tender flesh of her earlobe.

"You drive me to madness for wanting you," he said. His breath on her skin sent another wave of desire through her, settling in her apex. Her entire body shivered even though the room was warm. Ren's hands burned a path to her breasts, caressing them through the fine muslin of her dress and chemise. His fingers teased the peaks of her nipples through the material, causing her sensitive flesh to harden. A soft moan escaped her.

He dropped his mouth to one breast and gently nipped at the tip. She couldn't think, only feel, as his touch drove her insane. Ren's lips moved to her other nipple and Lia's head fell back as she offered herself up to him. The fevered passion he created within weakened her. If it weren't for his arm supporting her, she surely would have collapsed.

A knock at the door broke them apart. Breathless, Lia turned away from Ren and walked to the bank of windows for air. One of the lads carried in their tray and a bottle of red wine. She knew her face was flushed and her lips kiss-swollen, but that was not why she turned away. Ren had left wet spots on the light green front of her bodice. Even more embarrassing, she knew her nipples were now hard and noticeable under the wet material. She could feel them constricting further as the breeze blew in from the open window.

A cork popped. Wrapping her arms about her, she turned back to Ren and watched him pour two glasses of wine. He came closer and handed her one.

"We will have no more interruptions." Ren's eyes met hers, then roved downward to settle on the part of her anatomy she tried to cover with her arms.

"Are you sure? The day is still young, the sun is still high." She rambled, she knew, but never had a man caused her to feel so carnal. She'd witnessed some affection between her parents growing up, but never anything like this. Likely, her mother didn't know about them.

The feelings she had for her new husband were raw, primal. The act of love they shared was nothing like what she'd heard whispered about when she gathered with her friends and their married sisters. It was said to be sinful to desire the act. If those women only knew the primal way in which she wanted her husband, they would certainly be praying for her soul.

Ren placed his glass on the table and took her hand, leading her to a chair, where he pulled her down onto his lap.

“May I sit on the bench?” she asked, trying to stand.

He held her firmly in place, and smiled. His white teeth, slightly uneven, gleamed against his tanned face. “No.” He grinned. “I find I like having you on my lap.” His voice got raspy. “Among other places.”

Ren lifted the lid to their tray, and Lia took a gulp of her wine, then another, as he stabbed a piece of choice meat with his fork. He presented it to her to take a bite.

“I’m not hungry yet, it’s still early.”

“Believe me, you should eat it while it’s hot.”

“No thank you. I think I’ll wait until dinner. Could I perhaps have more of those wonderful tiny oranges I had this morning?”

He smiled. “Ah, you liked those? Picked those up in Morocco. You may have as many as you wish.”

Lia finished her wine and set the glass on the table. She tried to stand, but Ren’s hold kept her in place.

“Stay,” he said softly. It wasn’t a command. It wasn’t a plea. He was asking.

He desired her, it was obvious, and she felt a passion with him that she knew was destined since time began. But she still needed to hear him promise her one thing—the single thing that would determine if they were to have a happy life together. They were words she had to hear before she gave herself to him fully. “I will stay with you always, be yours always, if you promise me you will not take our children from me. I need to hear you say the words.”

He held her hand to his lips. “On my honor,” he whispered, as he placed a kiss on her palm. “On my honor, Lia, I will never separate you from our children.”

She exhaled, releasing the fear and tension that had been building inside her for days, feelings keeping her from committing herself fully to this man who was now her husband. “Thank you.” She kissed his cheek, the stubble rasping her lips. Pressing her cheek against his, she said again, “Thank you.”

He reached around her for the bottle of wine, and Lia breathed in the salty-sweet smell of his neck. Overcome by the urge to taste him, she placed a gentle, open-mouthed kiss on the curve of his neck. When she lifted her head, her eyes met his and she ran her tongue over her lips.

Ren set the bottle down, without refilling her glass. His gaze never left hers. His thumb played over her lower lip. “You captivate me, Lia.”

This was what her wedding night should have been. All sweet words and gentle hands. His tender kisses, and her quivering body. She felt his desire for her evident against her bottom. She reveled in

the fact that he wanted her to be the mother of his children. As a noble, he could have chosen any one of many available young ladies from among the finest families in all Europe. He chose her, even though their meeting wasn't the least bit conventional. He chose to marry her without anything or anyone to recommend her. He chose her knowing she came saddled with a young brother.

And she was now choosing him.

Ren unfastened the row of buttons along the back of her dress, then began to untie the binding that held her braid. His fingers slid into the hair at her nape and splayed on her scalp, first massaging, then pulling her hair loose to hang in thick, soft waves down her back. When Lia stood, she situated herself between his knees, he then lifted her dress and chemise from her, dropping them to the floor.

Wearing nothing, she trembled as his powerful hands tenderly caressed her flesh. He stroked and kneaded, kissed and suckled her breasts. Every touch nurtured and coaxed the passion within her. He stood and quickly shed his own clothing, then backed her to the bed while his lips roved over the sensitive column of her neck. Lia groaned as his hands worked magic on her body, touching her in her most sensitive places. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the feel of his fingers as they nimbly moved over her, often dipping into her to draw forth moisture. Soon, she was near to bursting with the pressure he created in her. She grabbed the pillow under her head and pulled it over her face to muffle her cries, when his fingers suddenly stopped.

"No!" Lia opened her eyes, and focused on his silver gaze. "Please don't stop!" He took the pillow from her and slid it beneath her hips, lifting her. Lia held his gaze as he moved down and covered her with his mouth. She watched as he brought his tongue out to touch her sensitive bud. Watching his head move and knowing what he was doing magnified the physical sensations until the only thing she felt was a growing, all-consuming desire to shatter. She wondered if it was possible to die of ecstasy, because she felt so close to doing so. Her hips bucked upward in an unconscious desire to bring her body nearer his. He placed his left hand on her belly, holding her steady. Occasionally he nipped her gently with his teeth, as fingers from his right hand moved deeply inside her, bringing her to the edge of sanity, where she begged him not to stop.

Until her entire body exploded into tiny pieces. Like fireworks, except *she* was the display. Of color. Of shapes. Of life. She took a ragged breath, allowing time for her body to quiet. Ren's fingers slowly withdrew from her, creating a tingling sensation over her sensitive walls, causing a groan to escape her.

He moved over her slowly, trailing drops of fire with each kiss as he moved his way up her abdomen, then between the valley of her

breasts, over her throat, and under her chin, until he reached her lips. He brought his mouth over hers, and she tasted her own musk as their tongues dueled in another passionate kiss.

Lia wanted to give to him the pleasure he gave to her. Placing her hands on his chest, she shoved him, rolling him off her and over to his back. Straddling him, she began to return, measure for measure, everything that he'd just done for her. She thought if she could make him feel just a portion of the extreme bliss she did when he loved her in that manner, then maybe he might experience ecstasy too.

She pulled her hair over to the side, as she began working her way down his body. Her tongue dipped into his mouth one last time before she went lower. Lia's lips and tongue caressed the muscular curve of his neck. When she reached his chest, she paid homage to one of his nipples.

His hand stopped her. "You don't have to," he said.

"I want to," she whispered as her fingers splayed wide over his muscular chest, playing with the curly black hairs abundantly sprinkled over it. "I am very attracted to your body. And that includes each hair on your chest." She leaned down again and kissed him there. "And your back." She kissed his chest again. "Your arms." She lifted a tanned forearm and kissed it on the sensitive skin on the inside. "Your belly," she whispered, then leaned over to kiss that part of him. She slid her hands down further, over his hips. "Legs." Lia moved lower and kissed the inside of first one thigh, then the other.

"And all parts in between." She wrapped her hands around his rigid shaft. Her gaze met his once more before she lowered her head to take him into her mouth.

Lia moved her mouth up and down over him, and swirled her tongue about the head. She lifted her mouth off and began to use only her tongue on the sensitive ridge on the underside of his shaft, bringing forth several drops of his sweetness. She licked them off, then took his enormous shaft back into her mouth again, taking him as deeply as she could. His groans of pleasure prompting her to continue.

Soon, he moved with her, trying once to stop her. When she wouldn't, he relented. She wanted him to experience the same erotic bliss he had created within her, wanted him to experience a release so powerful that the world would momentarily cease to exist for him—as he had done for her. Then he would truly be hers as much as she belonged to him.

He growled her name as she felt his entire body shudder, climaxing before collapsing back onto the mattress. She lifted her head and their eyes met. His dark silver eyes were filled with wonder and awe. He reached out for her, pulled her over him and kissed her. He parted her lips with his tongue, and began the cycle of passion all

over again, fanning the embers back to flame with each caress, and every playful touch.

He rolled her onto her back and drove into her. Lia rose up to meet him, wrapping her legs about his hips. She moved with him, each of his deep thrusts sending her slowly back to that pinnacle of desire—that place he could take her only when he was inside her, loving her.

Her body tensed once again, and she felt herself nearing another climax. The hair on his chest rubbed roughly over her tender nipples, as his body moved over her, and with each thrust the hair at the base of his shaft did the same over her sensitive nub. Her body coiled tighter and tighter as he continued to go faster and deeper. All these created an eruption within her, and she cried out his name as they shattered together.

Ren collapsed onto her, their bodies sliding against each other. For a moment she was afraid he might have died because she couldn't hear him breathing, until he heaved a sigh and rolled off her. He pulled her into the curve of his side, wrapping his arm about her.

She pressed her ear to his chest, listening to his racing heart, and was satisfied that all was well when his heartbeat slowed to a normal pace.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“What for?”

He kissed her temple, hugging her close. “No one has ever done that for me before,” he whispered as his hand lightly stroked her side.

“Not even your mistresses?”

“Not even my mistresses.”

“Then you wasted your money on them.”

Ren chuckled in the quickly dimming cabin.

“What is it you find so amusing?”

“You, my duchess. You are a breath of fresh air in this musty old world.”

Their voyage to England was made in under three weeks, propelled by good sailing winds and pleasant weather. Lia spent most of her days reading the books in Ren's small on-board library. They dined together almost every meal, and he kept her on his lap each time. Lia never objected, as it gave them an opportunity to grow closer.

Most days, Ren would allow her to sleep the morning away, especially after a passionate night of lovemaking. And in the afternoons he would escort her for a walk on deck in the unseasonably warm late-April sunshine.

The day they sailed through the Strait of Gibraltar, Lia, sitting in

the shade next to her husband asked him, "Were you planning to stop in Tangier?"

"No, I have a wife already," he said, smiling down at her, "I don't need another."

Playing along with him, she said, "You could always start a harem of your own."

"You don't leave enough for me to give to another woman," he said. "Besides, I don't understand how they make it work. Every woman I've ever known had a jealous side to her that was dangerous." He shook his head, and Lia could understand his dismay, as she hadn't understood the situation until she'd been forced to live in one. "Hakim has six wives, soon to have a seventh," Ren said. "He said there were over thirty women—not his wives—in his harem. I cannot imagine that each woman gets the attention she needs. Then too, dealing with the arguments and demands on his time.... Why, it boggles my mind."

"He doesn't have to sleep with them all. You do not understand, husband. The number of women in a harem is a sign of wealth and status. Most of Prince Hakim's women were gifts, given to him by men looking to garner his favor, he hasn't taken them all to his bed. That is why I was planning to run away if he had not asked for me within a matter of days." She turned away and looked for *Sea Witch* off in the distance. "As you know, my time was running out."

"Strong as you are, you never would have made it." He stared at the approaching land masses on both sides. "First you would have had to make it out of the palace without the guard being alerted. Then, trying to get passage to Italy on a boat would have been impossible for a woman alone." His eyes softened when he turned to her. "It's over now. You have your brother safe, for that we are thankful. But alone, you would never have made it."

She nodded, he was probably right. Though as she told him before, she would have died trying.

The closer they got to England, the colder the weather became, and the sunshine she relished in the Mediterranean became a distant memory. By the time they reached London, her skin had lost its rosy glow, and her cheeks were more wind-burned than sun-kissed. The fact that she still glowed a radiant pink, was because of Ren's lovemaking, according to him. During the voyage, they made love every day and every night, sometimes several times before the sun rose. Lia blushed when she thought of how many times she initiated their loving. The bed was no place for timidity—especially when she wanted to please her husband as he pleased her.

A few days later, off the coast of Portugal, as Lia peeled a tiny orange to share with her husband, she asked, "Why do you captain your vessel, when you clearly have a capable second?"

"I enjoy it," he said, "and I don't often get a chance to do it anymore."

"And why is that?"

Ren chuckled. "Hmm... Where to begin?"

"As you told me in Morocco, the beginning is always a good place."

"My shipping interests are an extended family business I inherited from my mother. Before my grandfather would leave me a share of the company, I had to learn how it ran, from the bottom up. It made for an interesting education as I grew up knowing I was the heir to the dukedom, but also partly responsible for the success of an international trading company that I was educated and trained to lead."

Lia fed him several pieces of the orange, and each time his lips closed around her fingers, she felt a tingling sensation race up her arm. She was discovering more about this amazing husband of hers each day. And as she did, she sent up a silent prayer of thanks for his presence in her life.

"My father inherited a massive debt from his own father, and a crumbling old castle that needed restoration before it fell in on them.

"Though I believe my father grew to love my mother, he married her for the money she brought to the union. You see, my mother was young, beautiful, and had an enormous dowry. As the only daughter of a Scottish shipping tycoon, my grandmother wanted only the best for her daughter. Grandmother brought mother to England one year, to present her to Queen Charlotte. It was said that my father made an offer for my mother within the week. Later, when I asked, he said he couldn't afford to lose her to someone who couldn't appreciate her as he would."

"I'm sure," she said, as she handed him another piece of orange. "So you are a part owner of a shipping company?" Lia asked.

"Yes, I actually run the company from London, though my investments are wide and varied these days." He motioned to Angus and had him come up to the wheel deck with them, when he arrived, Ren said, "I realize I have been remiss in giving the proper introductions. Permit me to rectify that, darling." The endearment, publicly given, caught her off guard, but she had no time to react, for Ren continued, "Lia, this is my Uncle Angus. He is my mother's brother, and has been a mentor to me for most of my youth. That is why you noticed the familiarity with which he addresses me. He is retired from sailing and manages operations of the company in Scotland. The two men you met in Genoa as my Captains, are actually my cousins, Cully and Flynn, Angus is their father. We are all equal partners in this shipping company founded by my maternal great-

grandfather, who started a small trading company out of Aberdeen many years ago. Have I confused you yet, sweetheart?"

"Not at all. You are fortunate to have such a large and loving family."

"Ah...." Ren let a sardonic little chuckle. "Only on my mother's side"

"Aye, on the Scots side, lass. A few of the lad's English relatives might be better connected, but they're not better people," the gruff Scot said. "If I say so m'self."

Nearly the same size and height as her husband, the old seaman's gray hair and beard were neatly trimmed and his skin weathered from his many years on the water and under the sun. When he smiled Lia could see a family resemblance. She thought of the captains on the other two ships and said, "Both of the young captains are your sons?"

"Aye, I even claim the red-headed one," Angus said.

Ren laughed. "Yes, even Flynn, who cannot tolerate rough seas without getting sick, is part of the family."

Angus grew sober, then turned to Ren and said, "Have ye told her about the other side of your family yet?"

"I was just about to do that," her husband replied.

"Good. It's about time she knows what's waitin' for ye when ye get back to Town."

The old salt arched a brow at the wheel, Ren said, "I'll stay here a while longer."

"My father had a younger brother who died many years ago. His son, my cousin, Thomas, is a year older than me. We grew up together, were tutored together, and went to Eton together. He was more than my cousin, he was my best friend. And along with Lord Michael Brightman, the three of us were some pretty smart mischief makers.

"We were close. When I was nine, my mother died after my sister Elise was born. A few days later Thomas found his father dead. We mourned together for our parents. Then his mother remarried and moved with her new husband down to Cornwall. Thomas continued at Eton with us but didn't do as well in his classes after that. He went to Oxford with us for a while, quit, and chose to go to Town and live off his allowance. By this time my father ascended to the title, and my maternal grandfather had died leaving me the shares of this company. Years later my father remarried, a lovely woman, Amelia, who gave birth to my youngest sister, Sarah, and whom Elise came to look upon as her mother.

"After university, I went to work with Angus and my cousins, I sailed for a few years, until....," he paused, sighing deeply, then saying, "until my father and stepmother were killed in a tragic accident."

He sighed again, and shifted his position. “Instantly my responsibilities went from near none, to almost overwhelming. Suddenly I was a young man—almost twenty-six years old—with no wife and no heirs. If something were to happen to me, my cousin, Thomas, would inherit all, the title, the fortune, everything. So I sought to correct the first issue right away, and after mourning my father, began the tedious task of finding a proper wife.”

“There’s your first mistake,” Lia replied. “You weren’t looking with your heart open to love, but rather like an employer filling a position.”

“Perhaps,” he grumbled, before going quiet again.

“So, where is your cousin now? Is he protecting you from runaway horses as you cross the road?”

Her husband let out a choked cough and stared at Lia as though she’d sprouted two heads.

“Ah, no,” her husband said. “After he left school, I finished university. Thomas chose a life of leisure, expecting to have everything provided for him. I chose work, to increase the family coffers. While Michael was apprenticing in law, and I was away negotiating contracts with growers and textile manufacturers in the Caribbean, India and Africa, Thomas befriended the wrong sort. He didn’t really have the money to move in those circles, so he began to gamble.”

Lia felt his heavy heart as he exhaled. This is the first time she’d witnessed his sadness. His cousin’s actions truly hurt him.

“Thomas is currently the heir to my title and estates.” His gaze raked over Lia’s form, settling on her belly. She instinctively put her hand over her womb. “But hopefully, not for long,” he said.

“I see.”

“No, I don’t think you do,” Ren replied. “What I haven’t told you yet is that he’s a very desperate, dangerous man. He attempted to kill me while I was out on a hunt. My game keeper witnessed him running away after my horse was shot out from under me. After that, I asked for an inquest into the carriage accident that took my father and Amelia’s lives, as I was not in the country at the time.” He checked the binnacle off to the side, then said, “The findings were inconclusive.”

“Do you think he killed them?”

“I believe so. Yes.”

“What do you think he will do when you return with a bride?” she asked.

“I don’t know, but you will be protected at all times. I promise you. When we arrive we will spend as little time as possible in London, and I shall take you to our home, the ducal seat, Haldenwood. Before I left I saw to it that my grandmother and sisters

were well-protected, while the detectives searched for him.”

“You left them? Did you not fear for their safety?” She was amazed that he would leave the country with his women at home.

“No. It’s me he wants,” her husband replied. “Me, and whoever stands between he and the title and fortune.”

Lia leaned back against the railing of the wheel deck, knowing she was now likely a target of his cousin. She wondered, too, if her life would ever return to the quiet idyll it once was.

The afternoon before they were due to arrive in London, Ren opened the door of the cabin, to find Lia, clad only in her chemise nervously pacing the room. Her one trunk was open, and all of her dresses lay either on the bed, or over the room’s single chair. Her back was to him, and she never heard his entrance as she lifted first one dress, then another, and tossed them both back to the bed. She repeated this several times before he stopped her by clearing his throat.

Lia’s head nearly hit a support beam overhead when she jerked upright in surprise. Her bright green eyes widened in shock, then relaxed upon realizing who it was. “Oh! I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you enter.” She held up one of her new dresses, a simple, pale rose muslin with an ivory lace overskirt from the high waist to the floor. Ren thought the square neckline would come daringly low. Too low for her to be seen outside of their bedroom. With Lia’s full breasts to fill it, the bodice would barely cover her dusky brown nipples.

He shook his head. “I paid for something with such a daring décolletage?”

“This dress covers more than any of the others! What am I to do?” Ren could see tears welling in those wonderful eyes of hers. “Whatever shall I wear to meet your family tomorrow? I don’t want them to think I’m an unfashionable simpleton without a clue of how to dress. Or worse, a *puttana*.”

Ren shook his head, moved the dresses, and sat in the chair. “Don’t worry, we won’t be in London but a day. Two at most. I detest this time of year in the city. My sisters, Elise and Sarah, are with my grandmother in the country.”

Lia exhaled, and visibly relaxed, but it was only momentary.

“I’m also afraid of the questions everyone will have. How will we explain our meeting? And marriage? If they knew that I was purchased by you, I will surely be shunned by society. So will you. Even a peer of the realm must adhere to certain societal mores.”

Ren was touched that she would think of him. His mistresses, and later Margaret, certainly never thought beyond what he could give them, or do for them. He felt a stab of guilt as he remembered

comparing her to them.

"I've given this a great deal of thought, Lia. I've concluded that we should stick as close to the truth as possible, to prevent any questions that might arise later should our stories differ by any degree."

"How do I explain meeting you in the palace of Prince Hakim?"

"You were there visiting your friend Maysun, a native of your country, who is one of the Prince's wives." When he saw her questioning gaze, he added, "They do not need to know she is a concubine."

Lia smiled. "You are right."

"You'll say that we met, fell instantly in love, and wanted to wed as soon as possible." He smiled. "The men will know why I married you the moment they see you."

Ren moved the pillows aside and sat on the bed, resting against the wall. "We then went directly to Genoa, where you had been living with a relative, and were wed by your priest, with the blessings of your aunt. No need to give her name at all. It may be a difficult stretch for us to imagine, but I don't think anyone from my set is familiar with any obscure Italian nobility, so I do not foresee a problem there.

"As your parents are deceased and you are responsible for your younger brother, we naturally brought him to England with us, to live together in harmony for the rest of our days."

She obviously understood the sarcasm tinging his voice. Lia nearly choked on his much-polished version of the truth, and sat on the edge of the bed, holding the rose muslin gown to her chest. "That's quite a tale. I hope it will work."

"It *will* work," Ren said confidently. "Your brother knows no more than that your aunt was cruel to you both, and that when we returned for him you argued. What head of a family doesn't argue when their charge suddenly claims she wishes to marry a man they do not know?"

"But, what if she begins to talk? And spreads tales and half-truths that would surely be fodder for the gossips? Even though she is still in Genoa, she knows many well-connected people, and I am afraid it is only a matter of time before her lies reach England. What would we do then?"

"First, she doesn't know who I am. And, anyone who knows me will believe what I say, or face my wrath should they spread such malicious lies. We counter her tales, with tales of our own. Such as her bouts with insanity, especially since the death of her husband, who squandered what was left of the family's fortune, leaving them nearly destitute with only a title for her adolescent son, and hopes of a good

match for her daughter.”

Ren watched as his wife considered his words. “Do you understand, Lia?”

She smiled. “Yes, and I will do my part to make this work.” She held another dress up for his approval. A pale blue-green with a daringly low-cut, rounded bodice. She looked at him curiously. “What about this one?”

“Do you have a scarf, or fichu, to put into the neckline?” She shook her head. “Well then, I rather like the first. You are right, it looks like it will cover more than those others,” Ren motioned to the stack tossed over the trunk. “I will have a seamstress come to the house and take measurements for the rest of your wardrobe. You will need more than just these few dresses.”

“But what do I wear tomorrow?”

“Sweetheart, it really doesn’t matter what you wear. You’re my duchess now.”

He had hoped his words would reassure her. Instead they brought on a fresh bout of nervous pacing.

She stopped suddenly, her eyes wide with fear. “Oh my God!” Tears welled in her eyes. “I’d forgotten! I’m the wife of a duke! I do not play the silly games polite society is so fond of. What will everyone think of me?”

“Not to worry, my dear,” he reassured. “We can spend a quiet season this year. Being newly married, everyone will understand.” He placed a hand over her lower belly. “Especially if you get with child.” She huffed and shoved his hand away and turned back to contemplate the outfits before her. “Although we will have to do the season next year for my sister’s come out,” he continued. “By then, you will have had plenty of time to acclimate to your station and my lifestyle. In a few months you will have a feel for the political undercurrent through the country. You’ll learn who is married to whom, and who holds power and influence over society. And I will never be far from your side, or someone might think to steal you away. Of course, then I’d have to kill him.”

Lia huffed, then tossed the dress she held at him. A fluffy cloud of white cambric landed on his face, as she began to ramble on in Italian about how men never understand anything.

Ren draped the dress over the back of the chair and smiled as he left the cabin to fetch a bottle of wine. Wine always calmed her. It had also proved to be a potent aphrodisiac with his little wife.

Yes, this situation called for a bottle of his best. And several hours with no interruptions.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next morning Ren's ships sailed up the Thames, winding their way to the Port of London. Lia stood next to her husband on the wheel deck of *Warlock*, which followed *Sea Witch* and *Sorceress* into port. She watched in amazement as they crept past hundreds of other ships and barges of all sizes, loaded with every manner of cargo. Canals, large and small, branched off from the river on both sides. Buildings stacked in rows lined the river, some as tall as five stories. The three ships in their group continued slowly upriver, finally furling their sails and dropping anchor near the London Bridge, behind a magnificent four-story, stone-faced structure which Ren identified as The New Custom House.

Throngs of people moved about the dock. Longshoremen loaded and unloaded crates, customs officials inspected cargo, businessmen supervised their investments, children scurried about, and women of a dubious profession sought clients.

Lia shivered in her cloak, and Ren wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her closer to his warmth. For most of the past four days, it had either rained or misted lightly, leaving everything damp. It seemed even her very bones were wet, which only magnified the chill in the air.

"Spring in London is dreary for the most part," Ren said, as they stood near the rail facing the customs office. "But it's not like this at Haldenwood. Right now, the pastures are green and filled with lambs and calves cavorting near their mothers. The sun seems to shine more outside of London, too. Flowers are beginning to bloom and, more importantly, the air is fresher."

"I have noticed the smell." Lia turned into his embrace, burying herself in his warmth. "I just assumed it was the odor of the docks."

"It does get better the further from the river you get, but not much. Everyone says you get used to it, eventually. I never did. That's why I reside at Haldenwood, only coming to Town when necessary for business."

"I can see why. How far away is your home, this—" Lia struggled for the correct pronunciation. "—Hal-den-wood?"

"On horseback it takes me four to four and a half hours. Although I did do it in about three once, and nearly ruined a good horse in the process. It's about six to six and a half hours by coach, depending on how many times we have to stop."

Lia turned a curious gaze to him.

He grinned down at her and explained, "It never fails that one or

the other of my sisters needs to stop every two hours. It wouldn't be so bad if they could coordinate their need to relieve themselves."

Realization of what he meant caused Lia to smile. "I shall restrict my needs to only the direst of emergencies, Your Grace," she said, turning away from him.

"Just don't make yourself uncomfortable doing so, *Your Grace*," he whispered into her ear.

She noticed the tinge of humor in his voice when he used her new title. It was another subtle reminder that she was now his wife. Not that she needed reminding. Her nerves had been doing that for the past twenty-four hours, making her queasy at the thought of facing life as a member of the nobility now, as it was not something she'd expected.

Ren led her down to the main deck. Angus waited for them, holding a small johnboat steady and even with the deck.

"I'll lower ye after ye all get in," the old Scot said to Ren.

"Has someone sent for my carriage?"

"Aye, Flynn's sent a lad up to the house a'ready to notify 'em of yer arrival."

Ren lifted Lia by the waist. The heat from his large hands holding her warmed her insides, reminding her of his tender loving that very morning. Over the past three weeks, Lia had come to realize that it didn't matter how the two of them met, she was happy now that he was in her life. She was starting to think there might be an agreeable future in store for them. It was what she'd been praying for since they'd married. He set her carefully down on one of the seats in the small boat, and climbed in after her, taking the seat opposite, facing her. Two crewmen also climbed in, and once all were settled, Angus ordered the boat lowered to the water.

The sailor behind Lia used an oar to push them away from *Warlock* then began to row them toward the crowded dock. Ren pointed out some of the major landmarks to her. "This first bridge is London Bridge. Just past that, if you can see it, is the Southwark Bridge. It's still under construction, but should be completed soon."

She tried to get a glimpse of the new bridge through the forest of masts and sails in front of them, but could not. When they pulled up alongside the pier at Billingsgate, one crewmen climbed onto it, and tied them off, while the other held them in place. Shivering from the cold, damp winds, Lia remained as still as she could, afraid to fall into the murky waters of the river should the boat tip over. Ren was next out. When he reached the dock, he extended his hand to her and lifted her up.

His hand warmed hers as she took it. "Even through your gloves I can tell your hands are like ice." He wrapped his arms about her,

warming her. Leaning down to her ear, he whispered, "We need to get you into a hot bath. Perhaps I'll even join you."

She pretended to ignore him as she led the way up the narrow wooden steps from the landing to street level, but his words did melt her insides. The crewmen rowed back out to the ship, leaving them alone among the crowd on the dock.

They waited only a few minutes until a closed carriage came around the corner through the dockside traffic to stop behind the Custom House. The driver stood in his perch and scanned the heads of the people below him. Ren caught the man's attention with a virtually unnoticeable lift of his hand. As the carriage neared, Lia sucked in her breath when she saw the glossy black finish with its ducal crest and the impeccably liveried driver. A footman in matching attire held the door open for them and Ren handed her up into the carriage. She sank into the deep squabs of dark gray velvet, taking the seat facing forward. Ren sat opposite her. When the vehicle lurched forward, she cried out, "No, stop!"

"What is it?," Ren asked, leaning toward her.

"My brother? Aren't we going to wait for him?"

"Don't worry about Lucky. Cully will bring your brother with him when he comes to the house this afternoon." She sat back, relaxing only slightly. "This way," Ren continued, "you'll get to rest and freshen up before he arrives."

She crossed her arms and exhaled a deep, aggravated breath. "I don't know why men think women need so much rest," she muttered in Italian. "I have done nothing but rest for the entire time I was on your ship."

He moved to sit next to her, then wrapped his arms about her, he whispered in her ear, "We did get some exercise during our voyage, wife." His hot breath sent shivers through her, arousing her again, causing her to feel no more than an animal because of how easily he did so. "If you've forgotten, and are not tired, we can refresh your memory." His finger lightly traced a path along her jaw, down her neck, stopping at the top button of her cloak. "Beginning with our bath."

Lia sighed and melted into his embrace, smiling to herself as she rested her head on his chest. She cuddled nearer his warmth, comforted by his arms around her. It would be so easy to fall in love with him. So easy. But she had to keep in mind theirs was an arrangement, not a love match. And even though they shared passion, it wasn't love.

She stared in wide-eyed wonder at all the passing sites. It was so unlike her home outside Naples. So different. Occasionally she would ask Ren what a building or landmark was, and he'd tell her. The docks

were crowded, but the streets were positively overflowing with people. Traffic was heavy as they moved through the city at a crawl. She'd never seen such a multitude of inhabitants in one city. Seeing all the people moving about caused her to wonder what their jobs were, what purpose motivated their being where they were at that moment.

Ren stretched his legs out and lay against the deep-cushioned back. "I wish there was time to take you on an outing before we leave, but I'm afraid there isn't."

Lia turned to meet his steady gaze. "Surely we can stay a few days?"

He shook his head. "For safety's sake, we must leave for Haldenwood as soon as possible. I have been away too long. After Thomas has been caught, we will return."

She nodded in agreement, just as she heard church bells begin ringing a familiar hymn. The music was beautiful, almost heavenly. Closing her eyes, she could imagine she was in heaven. The sound got louder as they passed the front of the enormous cathedral from whence it came. Lia crossed herself, then stared in awe at the most beautiful church she'd ever seen. A single tear escaped and trickled down her face.

"Will you cry every day when St. Paul's rings their bells?" Ren asked.

His words brought her out of her trance. She turned to his soft gaze. "What?"

"I just asked if you were going to cry every day when St. Paul's —" He pointed out the window to the church now behind them, "—rings its bells?"

"Oh, no." Lia wiped her cheeks. "I was thinking about my parents. I wish they could have seen this church. It is magnificent. It's almost as beautiful as the *Cattedrale di San Gennaro*."

"I'm sure they would have appreciated its beauty as much as you."

The rest of the ride to Ren's town house passed in silence. Lia continued to stare out at the sights of London as the carriage moved through the crowded streets. When they finally stopped in front of a four-story house faced with white stone, she knew she was again gawking, but couldn't help herself. She'd never before seen anything so grand.

"Is this where you live?" she asked, her surprise evident in the cracking of her voice.

"It is where we live when we are in Town. This is Caversham House."

"*Santa Maria*." She stared in awe at her surroundings and turned to Ren with wide eyes. "I had no idea."

“I never hid what I am. Why does this surprise you?”

“I knew you had a title, with perhaps a small fortune, but I did not expect *this*.”

The footman hurried forward to open the door for them.

“There is much I do not know about you, husband.”

“Welcome home, Your Grace,” the footman said.

Her husband nodded an acknowledgement to the man, and reached into the carriage for her hand. She moved to the door and as she was about to step down, he lifted her by the waist and set her gently onto the foot path.

Lia didn’t have time to scold him for lifting her, rather than assisting her, because another impressively-attired footman appeared and opened the tall, black painted door to the house for them. Her husband led her up the wide, marble steps into the foyer.

She continued to gape as she pushed the hood of her cloak back and simply stared at her surroundings. The black and white checkerboard marble floor and staircase certainly caught one’s eye, but the home’s furnishings wrapped her in a welcoming warmth. The highly polished, dark mahogany furniture was in startling contrast to the white walls. A gilt-edged mirror hung from the wall above an entry table, reflecting a delicate china vase which held fresh-cut flowers. Looking up she saw a massive crystal chandelier, and the leaded-glass fanlight window over the tall black-painted wooden doors.

“Welcome back, Your Grace,” the butler said as he removed Ren’s overcoat. The man’s voice brought Lia’s attention back, and now she noticed the staff had lined the hallway to welcome their lord. Her eyes met those of the butler and his steady, professional gaze showed no emotion. Ren came around to take her cloak, handing it to a footman, before turning his attention to the butler and the woman standing in front of the other servants.

“Niles, Mrs. Steen,” her husband said, “this is my bride, the new Duchess of Caversham.”

Lia watched as their eyes widened for just a moment, then their expressions were quickly under control. The two smiled, then congratulated Lia and their employer. Their marriage had obviously caught them by surprise. Straight-backed, her head held high, she smiled warmly and met each of their gazes directly.

Ren began to ease her toward the wide, curving staircase. “When Her Grace’s things arrive, have them sent to our rooms. A little boy will be arriving as well. He is my wife’s brother, Luchino. He will occupy my old room in the nursery. Have a bath brought up to my rooms, and a luncheon tray. For two, please. And afterward, we are not to be disturbed until dinner.”

He continued up the curving staircase, taking them two at a time. Lia had a difficult time keeping up with his pace, nearly tripping several times before they were halfway up. Ren turned and swung her into his arms.

"You are embarrassing me," she whispered. Squeezing her eyes shut, she hid her face in the curve of his shoulder. They passed several house maids who curtsied as they went by, and Lia wondered how she was to ever gain their respect after his display of adolescent behavior. A long walk down a thickly carpeted hallway led them to a doorway where another footman stood. He opened the door wide, closing it silently behind them as her husband carried her through, never letting her down.

Ren carried her to his bed and dumped her in the center. Her eyes flew open just in time to see him throw himself onto the bed next to her. His hand came around to brush the stray hair that had come loose from her braid. The delicate touch of his fingers wrapping themselves in her hair near her cheek warmed her. His eyes shone like fine silver, and his gaze never left hers.

"Didn't I tell you it wouldn't matter what you chose to wear for the ride home?" One hand dipped low into the square bodice of her pale rose muslin, causing her heart to skip a beat, then race, as he lightly stroked her bare skin.

"You need to cease behaving as an infatuated boy," she teased. Her smile faded and another, more serious thought crept in. "How am I to gain the respect of the staff if you treat me like... like... a play thing? I'm a woman, fully grown, and must now behave in a way so as to reflect your status, making you proud. My job as your wife is to support your position in society honorably and with grace." She closed her eyes again and inhaled a shaky breath. When she opened them she saw his crooked, devilish grin. "I'm serious, husband, do not laugh."

She removed his hand from her bodice. "I shall require more gowns, respectable gowns, not with necklines such as these. I am no single miss that I must display my assets to attract a man. I already have one."

"Then when the dressmaker comes tomorrow, tell her exactly what you want. You will need a few dinner dresses and formal gowns for those times we must make an appearance at some function or another." His index finger traced a path along the edge of her neckline from one shoulder to the next, causing her breath to catch when he paused between her breasts. "But other than those occasions, I don't see a need for any clothing whatsoever." His head dipped to the valley where his finger had just been, and kissed her there. His lips lightly traced a path up the slopes of her breasts, kissing the full curve of each. "I rather like you as God made you," he whispered. His warm

breath sent a flood of shivers down her spine, feeding that familiar pool of desire in her core.

Frustrated with her own body's weakness to resist his attentions, she tried to roll away from him but his muscled arm held her in place. "Our luncheon tray will...." she said.

He nuzzled the area just behind her ear, and chuckled softly at her attempt to stop his lovemaking. "It will keep in the sitting room." He kissed the hollow of the base of her throat, and she tilted her head to offer him more. His tongue traced a path upward, over her chin. "Because I want you again," he whispered before taking her lips in another of his whirlwind kisses.

Lia woke to the sound of a knock at the bedroom door. She reached for her husband, but the sheets on his side of the bed were cool. Sitting up, she pulled the covers up to her chin, nervously wondering from which of the four doors the sound came, and whether she should respond. A moment later, another knock came, louder this time. It came from an interior door, which she presumed led to a sitting room. "Yes?"

The door opened, and a dark head leaned in. When Lia saw the maid from the inn in Genoa, she cried out with delight.

"I thought we left you behind," she said excitedly in her native tongue. "I asked my husband to bring you along after I witnessed... I'm so sorry, Ghita, for my part in what happened to you. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Oh, my lady, there's nothing to forgive." Ghita's eyes widened when she stepped into the rich blue and dark mahogany room. "I have never in my life seen such a home! Every room I see is more beautiful than the last." She picked up a robe, holding it out for Lia, who dropped the sheet, took the garment, wrapped it around herself and tied it about her waist.

Ghita crossed the carpet toward a door to Lia's right. "Your rooms are through that door. I have all your dresses steamed and hanging in the wardrobe. You have but to tell me which you would like to wear for dinner and I'll help you dress."

"Thank you." Lia scooted to the edge of the massive bed. It was so high, her feet could not reach the ground. She slid off and walked through the door Ghita held open for her. Her eyes took in the splendor of the room, a much more feminine version of her husband's. A pale blue and gold, the room had textured silk wall coverings and velvet drapes. Sunlight poured through the lace sheers covering the windows. The furniture, all painted white and gold, gave the room a much lighter feel than the master suite, with its dark furnishings.

Her carpet was light blue with intricate patterns of white roses

climbing a golden trellis. Barefoot, she sank her toes into the rich tufts, relishing its softness. “O, *Dio mio!*”

“I said the same thing, my lady,” the maid replied, as she opened one of the room’s three wardrobes. “His Grace said that dinner was in an hour. He is downstairs in the study waiting for you.”

“Is my brother here yet?”

“Sì,” Ghita held out several dresses for Lia to choose from. Lia chose one to wear, and the maid continued. “Luchino’s upstairs resting before dinner. He ate a big noon meal, and has been playing in the garden with a puppy he found at the dock. He petted the thing a few times while we waited for the coach. When we left, it followed us for several blocks. The boy begged *Signore* Cully to stop the carriage so he could fetch the beast. *Signore* Cully said no, but Luchino was rather insistent about it. So we picked up the animal and brought it home. His Grace said the dog was to remain in the stables. Your brother said no, the dog stays here in the house, with him. Eventually, a compromise was reached, and the pup has a bed in the back garden, and he has already given it a name.”

Lia sat at the vanity smiling, as Ghita began to style her hair. “What has he named the pup?”

Their eyes met in the mirror. Ghita smiled. “*Brutto,*” she said. “The name is appropriate, as the thing is very ugly, if I do say so myself. It has an enormous head, is bony and full of fleas.”

Lia laughed. “Did my husband make him bathe the pup?”

“Not His Grace. The butler made him do it,” Ghita struggled with the English butler’s name. “*Signore* Niles.” As she coiled Lia’s hair into a loose chignon, pinning it carefully, the maid continued, “Oh my lady, you should have seen the man’s face when Luchino walked in carrying the wriggling pup. He went mad! *Veramente pazzo!*”

As the maid continued to describe the scene as it played out, they both erupted in laughter, Ghita doubling over, holding her side. “I could have sworn the man was about to turn blue,” Ghita said. She caught her breath and continued, “*Signore* Cully stepped in and asked your brother to carry the dog around back and leave him in the garden.

“When Luchino came back in the house, he was nearly as dirty and flea-infested as that mangy pup. That’s when *Signore* Niles made your brother bathe—first the ugly creature, then himself.”

Lia smiled at the reflection in the small mirror before her, delighted that her brother was once again his usual self. She promised herself once more that she would do anything within her power to make Luchino’s life happy again.

Once her hair was styled, Ghita assisted her in dressing. It seemed to take forever for the new maid to fasten all the tiny buttons along

her spine. Dressed, Lia walked to the gilt-edged cheval mirror and, smoothing her skirt needlessly, gave final approval to her appearance. Calming the butterflies in her belly, she hoped her husband's family approved because she really did want to make the marriage a pleasant one for both Ren and herself. Ghita opened the door for her and she proceeded along the red-carpeted corridor to the marble staircase, then down to her first dinner in her new home.

Lia looked into the front rooms of the house's main level, near the foyer where she'd entered, and discovered only parlors. She continued down the hallway, devoid of servants, knowing that eventually she would find her husband. Her search wasn't only to find him, but also to learn where and what each room was as she'd not yet had a tour of the house. Finally she saw a footman enter the hallway carrying a tray with a pitcher and four goblets.

When he got closer, she asked, "I was wondering where I might find my husband and my brother."

"Yes, His Grace is in his study, awaiting your company." He set the tray on a commode table, and led her down the hallway. "The young man has already been roused, and is dressing for dinner as His Grace has requested the boy's presence in the dining room this night."

Lia nodded and thanked the man, following him the rest of the way, until he announced her entrance in the masculine room. She met her husband's molten metallic gaze as she stepped forward. Ren rose from the chair behind his massive desk and came around to meet her in the middle of the long room. Taking her small gloved hand in his larger one, he turned it over and kissed it affectionately in the center, his eyes never leaving hers.

Time stood still for Lia as she savored the heat of his lips through the silk of her gloves. Even though they'd made love only hours before, his touch sent shivers racing through her body. She sucked in a breath, unaware that she'd stopped breathing, and broke eye contact when she realized there were others in the room.

Ren stepped aside and taking her hand, led her deeper into the long room. He stopped before his uncle and the men she remembered from Genoa, his cousins. The three men smiled as her husband introduced them.

"Lia, you remember, my uncle, Angus," he turned to the older of the three men, now clean shaven and freshly bathed. He appeared a weathered old businessman in his finely tailored dinner clothing, and when he smiled, appeared fatherly and warm. "Mr. Angus Culloden Sewell, I'd like for you to meet my wife, Her Grace, Angelia Serena, The Duchess of Caversham." Angus bowed to her and when he rose took her hand and placed a kiss above the knuckles.

"Your Grace, it is my pleasure to welcome you to our family."

“Thank you, Angus. I hope to make your nephew very happy.”

“I think ye already have from the looks of it, Your Grace.”

Ren moved to the first of his two cousins, a tall black-haired man, who looked like a much younger version of his father, and the second young man, who had some of his father’s features, but not the coloring. “Lia, it is long past time I introduce you properly to my two maternal cousins, and the remaining two partners in Aberdeen Trading Company.

“Mr. Culloden Lambert Sewell, and Mr. Flynn Lambert Sewell.” Addressing all three men, Ren said, “Gentlemen, may I present my Duchess, Lia.” His cousins bowed deeply and when they rose they too kissed the air above her knuckles.

Her husband’s cousins also were freshly shaved and bathed and she noticed, in their formal dinner attire, the family resemblance was strong, even with the red-headed cousin. “Gentlemen, I am honored to meet you both.” She turned to Captain Cully, the older of Ren’s two cousins, and said, “I thank you for caring for my brother during the voyage. No one knows more than I what a handful he can be.”

“’Twas nothing, Your Grace,” said the man. “Lucky will make a fine sailor one day.”

“Don’t tell her that Cully,” her husband warned. “My wife has other plans for her brother.”

“Children will always choose their own paths,” her husband’s uncle said, shaking his lightly peppered black hair. “There’s nothing you can do to prevent it.”

Ren asked for wine, and the men toasted her, their marriage, and this last trip which was looking as profitable as the previous ones. Talk soon turned to the issue of his cousin from the other side of his family tree, Lord Thomas Whitby. Ren mentioned that all was well with his grandmother and sisters at his country home, as he’d heard from the security chief at Haldenwood. He’d also received a report from the investigators searching for his cousin, they believe he is hiding in London.

As the men spoke and made plans to quit Town, Lia looked about her husband’s study. On her right, a step up from where she stood, rose a tall built-in bookcase with beveled glass doors, filled with books on business, law, architecture, agriculture and history. A circular table in the center of the room held another porcelain vase filled with fresh-cut spring flowers which perfumed the room with their delicate scent. She had noticed earlier that fresh flowers were everywhere in the house, in nearly every room and on all the tables in the foyer and hallways. Flowers were usually a decorating touch done by a woman. She couldn’t imagine that her husband was a gardener—at least not of this magnitude. She wondered if this was the work of the

housekeeper. If not her, then who?

She glanced at her husband, still deeply involved in his conversation, and turned back to the flowers. Upon hearing a knock at the door, Ren called out for the person to enter. The door opened slowly, and her brother entered the room. She ran across the thick green and gold carpet, and wrapped her arms around Luchino, hugging him fiercely. The boy pulled himself away from her, pink-cheeked with embarrassment.

"What's wrong, Luchino?" Lia asked him softly in Italian, knowing all eyes in the room were on them.

"Look at these clothes." He pulled at his pants with both hands. "I'm not some baby that I have to wear knickers and stockings!"

Ren laughed, and Lia heard him explain to the other men what her brother had said. He came over and patted Luchino on the shoulder.

"Well, they were quite the thing when I wore them, some twenty-five years ago," Ren said in Italian.

"I want grown up clothes and boots, Lia. Not these things," her brother motioned to the frilly shirt and buttoned knee pants, then to the black, silver-buckled shoes with heels he was wearing. "These are girl shoes!"

Lia looked down at the items in question. The buckle looked too large for the shoe, which also had an unfashionably high heel for a man, much less for a child.

"We'll have to see if we can't remedy that for you tomorrow," Ren replied, leading them all back to the group of men standing in front of the fireplace.

She saw the others' attempt to hide their amused smirks, and felt a surge of protectiveness toward her brother. He'd grown up wearing different styled clothing. So she now had to help him acclimate to the clothing as well as the customs and language.

"Well, Lucky, you're sure lookin' quite the dandy," Cully said.

Luchino looked from Cully back to her. She translated what he said.

"I don't like these clothes," her brother said slowly in English. "They are for babies."

"Och, no, lad," Cully replied. "Babes wear gowns. Even little boy babes."

Again, Luchino looked to Lia for help in translating. After she did, he puffed his chest out and defiantly placed his hands on his hips, and said firmly, "I never wore gowns as a babe. My father wouldn't allow my mother to put girl clothes on me."

Just then relief from the conversation entered the room. Niles announced dinner, and Ren led the way, tucking his wife's hand over

his left forearm. His right hand covered hers, and Lia felt a shiver course through her body, creating bumps on her arms that, thankfully, were hidden by her long gloves and cap sleeves.

“Cold, dear?” Ren asked.

“Perhaps just a little.”

“I’ll see that the fire in the dining room is built up for you.” He leaned over to whisper in her ear, “And, later tonight, I’ll see to it you stay warm until morning.”

Blood rushed to the surface of her skin, making her blush instantly. All of a sudden, she felt a little weak in the knees and more than just a little light headed. Lia wondered at the effect this man had on her. Would he always have the ability to do this to her? With just his words? His touch? A glance? For her, these feelings were wondrous. She never thought she’d come to care for him so much. Originally, she told herself that this was just an agreement she had to make the best of. But during their weeks on the boat, she learned much about her husband as a man. And what she discovered caused possessive, protective feelings to take root in her heart.

She took her brother’s hand, knowing a conversation with him was far safer and less flustering. He told her about the puppy he found that morning, and that he’d already named it.

“I can’t wait to see him,” Lia said.

His dark eyes sparkled and his entire body shook with excitement. “We can go out right after we finish dinner!”

“I was thinking perhaps tomorrow morning.”

The boy sighed heavily in disappointment. “Okay. But can I see him after dinner? I’ll bring him some scraps. He’ll love it!”

“Sì, *caro*.” She ruffled the boy’s hair. He immediately flattened back the curls with his hands and stepped away from her, looking annoyed that she’d mussed his appearance.

“Thanks, Lia.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lia watched Luchino trying to covertly shove his linen napkin, bulging with scraps, into his coat pocket. She smiled as she realized she didn't have the heart to tell him that the napkin wouldn't fit. Closing her eyes, she said another silent prayer of thanks to have him back.

"Can I be excused now, Lia?" he asked softly.

She replied in a voice only he could hear, "Yes, just don't get dirty again. You've already had one bath today."

An indignant look replaced his mischievous smile. "I don't need a bath just because my clothes get dirty. When I take the dirty clothes off, my body is still clean."

Her brother backed his chair away from the table, making a loud scraping noise on the polished hardwood floor. Ren turned toward them, his attention pulled away from the men's conversation by the sound.

"Are you going to the garden to feed your pup that third serving of beef tips?" he asked.

Luchino's face turned a deep scarlet now that he'd been caught. He looked from Ren to Lia nervously. She smiled and nodded to him, letting him know it was fine, that he didn't have to fear her new husband. "He is mine. I will care for him." Luchino turned and ran from the room with his bulging dinner napkin in hand.

Lia listened to the gentlemen's conversation for several minutes, then pushed her sorbet cup away from her slightly, feeling very full and suddenly tired. Glancing at Ren, she saw that he was still deeply involved in their discussion. She then fiddled with her wineglass, hoping to catch his attention so she could excuse herself to go to her room. Still, he didn't notice her. She stared down at the gilt bronze mounts on the claw-footed base of the enormous mahogany table for a few moments, waiting.

Taking matters into her own hands, she nodded at the footman, who came to her place and aided her in sliding back the heavy chair. This got Ren to turn her way. Standing, she smiled at her husband and his relatives. "If you will excuse me, please, gentlemen. I find I am more tired than I thought."

"Och, lass, a journey such as the one ye just had has been known to put some grown men to bed fer days," said Angus, with a fatherly nod of his graying head. Lia noticed his brogue became more pronounced with each glass of wine he imbibed.

Ren walked her to the doorway, and leaned in closer and spoke

softly near her ear, "I'll join you shortly." His warm breath stirred the baby-fine curls near her ear and sent chills over her sensitized skin. When he dropped a kiss on her cheek, her stomach began to roil. She needed to leave the room quickly. She nodded, then hurried the entire distance to her bedchamber. Once her door was shut she ran straight to the chamber pot, and expelled her dinner. Ghita walked in just as she reached for a damp cloth to wipe her face.

"Oh, my lady! Are you not well?" Her young maid's face was full of concern for her new mistress.

"It's nothing. I think the stress from the journey has finally caught up with me." Lia lowered herself onto the end of the damask-covered chaise and put her head between her knees.

"Let me help you to bed." Ghita helped her to her feet and began to undress her. Once she was in her night dress and all the pins had been removed from her hair, Lia eyed the bed longingly, then ran back to her chamber pot.

Minutes later she was snuggled in her bed, inhaling deeply the clean, floral scent of fresh sheets. She remembered Ren saying he was coming to join her shortly. As much as she enjoyed his lovemaking, what she really wanted was sleep.

Ren loosened his cravat, eager to join his wife next door. He wondered if she'd waited up for him, and found himself hoping she had. Leaving his jacket and neckcloth hanging over a chair, he went to their adjoining door and entered her room.

He waited a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the dimness within, and saw Lia asleep in the center of the bed, propped upon a pile of pillows. A movement from the darkened corner announced the presence of Ghita, who stood and walked over to him.

"She is very tired, Your Grace," the maid said softly so as not to wake her mistress. Ghita motioned for Ren to follow her away from the bedside, where she could whisper a little louder. "She does not want you to know this, but my mistress threw her dinner into the chamber pot tonight."

Ren burst into laughter, and caught himself, remembering Lia slept some fifteen feet away. Ghita's eyes widened in reproach. Something, he thought, had to have been lost in the translation.

"My lady is sick and you laugh?" the upset maid asked.

"What do you mean by sick?"

"My lady vomited when she got back here from dinner."

"What do you think could be wrong?" he asked, now concerned about Lia. He hoped she wasn't coming down with anything. He resolved to get her out to the fresh air of the country quickly.

"Perhaps it is just the stress from the journey, as Her Grace

suggested. Then again, it could be something more.”

“Such as?”

“Could she be with child?”

Ren didn’t have to think about it. It was what he’d planned, but he hadn’t thought it would happen this quickly. He’d been with her each day and night for the past five weeks, and she’d not yet come into her monthly flow.

“It’s very likely.” A slow smile grew on his expression. Then he noticed Lia’s maid relax and also smile.

“Congratulations, Your Grace,” Ghita said. “You and my lady will have beautiful children.”

Ren held up a hand to stop the maid. “Ghita, my wife does not suspect, does she?” The maid shook her head. “Do not tell your mistress the news just yet. I would like to arrange for a gift.”

The occasion called for something special, a magnificent jewel or other precious bauble. *Women love a trinket at times like these*, he remembered his father telling him when his stepmother, Amelia, became pregnant with his sister, Sarah.

Still smiling, Ren returned to his room and poured himself another glass of port. Nipping the end of a cigar, he imagined his grandmother’s joy on hearing the news. All of it. Kicking off his shoes, he lifted one foot then another, onto the stool in front of his chair. Staring into the fire before him, he envisioned an infant. His son. The lad would, of course, look like his father, so no one could ever dispute his parentage. He finished the wine and stood to refill his glass when there was a knock on his door.

“Yes?”

Niles entered, carrying a silver tray on which lay a note bearing the regent’s seal. Even from this distance it was recognizable, which dampened Ren’s good spirits.

“This arrived by messenger just now, Your Grace.”

“Doesn’t the messenger know the hour?”

“I assume so, Your Grace,” replied the obviously tired, stern-faced butler.

“Leave the note on the desk and I will respond in the morning. I am in no mood to deal with him tonight.”

“Shall I show the messenger a room, Your Grace? The man says he was told to await your reply.”

“Why that arrogant....” Ren restrained himself in front of his butler. Snatching the missive from the tray, he broke the seal and scanned the contents. Cursing to himself, he grabbed the quill and dampened the tip in the inkwell.

We will attend, was all he wrote. He would explain how he came to be married when he and Lia attended the dinner. He tossed the

quill onto the desk and handed the note back to the butler.

“Did a reply ever come from Brightman?”

“No, Your Grace,” his butler replied. “The butler has informed the messenger that Lord Brightman is in the country, and the messenger left word that you have returned, sir.”

“Thank you, Niles.”

The man gave a slight nod of acknowledgement and left. After Niles was gone, Ren let loose every expletive he’d previously withheld to the now empty room.

Damn the man. How had he found out so quickly? And worse, if the Regent new about his foreign bride, then who else knew? How long would it take for Thomas to learn of his wife, and her possible changed condition?

This was yet another reason to get her to Haldenwood as soon as possible.

Lia stirred and rolled over to her other side, not wanting to face the sunshine streaming in through the windows. Even without knowing the time, she knew it was late. She semi-consciously recognized the sound of someone walking into the room and setting a tray on the table, then china and silverware clinking. Reaching for her blankets, she pulled them over her head in an effort to mute the noises and resume her peaceful slumber.

“My lady, it’s time to get up,” Ghita said softly.

“No, I want to sleep just a while longer.” The aroma of freshly brewed tea filled the room, Lia lifted her head from the pillow, holding her hands over her eyes to shield them from the light.

“It is almost noon, you must get up,” the maid repeated, this time more firmly. “His Grace has summoned a seamstress for you, and she’s already here.”

“So soon?” Lia buried her head under a pillow, holding it down with an arm. “I’ve not been here a full day yet!”

“I do not understand their language, but I gather there is to be an important event soon.”

Lia lifted a corner of the pillow and peeked out curiously to see Ghita holding out a dressing gown for her. “What kind of event?”

“*Non sono certo*,” Ghita replied. “*Una cena formale?*”

The maid helped her to her feet, and Lia immediately felt dizzy and queasy. She slowly sat back down on the edge of the canopied white four-poster, and closed her eyes. She cradled her head in her hands, and prayed for the ill feeling to pass. How was she to attend or host a formal dinner feeling like this?

Lia thought about it a moment and shook her head. “I think we should inform my husband that tonight would not be a good night for

inviting guests to dinner,” she said.

“It’s too late. His Grace is already gone and will not return until late this afternoon.” Ghita put a slice of warm unbuttered bread in her hand. “Before you stand, take a few bites of this. It will help you feel better. Then you can drink some black tea, without the cream or sugar.”

Lia didn’t question how Ghita knew about her illness this morning, she just did as she was told. After swallowing her first bite, she immediately began to feel better. “I didn’t realize that I was so fatigued from the trip. It’s affected my stomach in a rather odd manner. Do you think this will work?”

“I’m sure it will,” the dark-eyed maid replied, smiling down on her mistress. “Now let’s get you presentable for that seamstress waiting below.”

For the next three hours, Lia was measured by two women from head to toe. Each woman took her own set of measurements. Her height, width, bust, circumference of her arms, waist and even the fingers on both hands were measured. That ordeal over, one of the women brought in three partially completed gowns, one white, another a pale yellow, and the last a burgundy and gold combination. Lia’s arms ached from holding them out for the seamstress and her assistant. As they pinned the dresses to size, another girl began piecing together undergarments, finishing them with nimble, speedy fingers. What was even more amazing was that the assistant doing this work couldn’t be more than twelve.

When they released her, Lia set out to find what mischief her brother was up to. He’d been abnormally quiet all afternoon, so she guessed he was probably in the gardens playing with his new pup. As she hadn’t yet had a chance to see much of her new home, she went in search of Luchino, satisfying her curiosity on the way.

Shortly before nine, in his office at Caversham House, Ren leaned back in the leather wing-back chair, and sipped from his morning cup of coffee. He tried to make sense of the information in the folio his investigator had sent over that very morning. His cousin had gone into hiding immediately after he’d taken the shot at him. He knew that cutting Thomas off and banning him from all the ducal properties would make him desperate. Now he waited for his cousin to make a mistake, especially now that news of Ren’s new wife was spreading. It would be just a matter of time before Thomas would slip up.

Ren couldn’t chance Lia getting injured, so he planned to leave in two days time. Haldenwood was secure, Cartland assured, as there had been no sight of Thomas on or near Haldenwood, or any of his other properties. Letters from his grandmother and sisters confirmed

the investigator's report, as they'd assured him all was well at home.

Ren laughed as he read Sarah's scribblings, in which she said that by his next trip she would be big enough to accompany him should he need another hand on the ship. She had no way to know that his sailing days were over, for he now had two new reasons to remain ashore.

The door opened and his good friend, Michael, strode into the room. Grinning big, his dark brown hair damp and mussed, his breeches mud-splattered, Michael looked as though he'd raced from his uncle's estate, Woodhenge, back to London.

Ren returned a lazy smile and stood. "How goes it? Out to visit the uncle on the crown's business?" The two men shook hands.

"I stopped there last night, but no, my business was at Haldenwood."

"By your smile, I see nothing is amiss at home. Why were you there?" Ren tried to hide the fact that his heart was sinking. He prayed his sister wasn't back up to her old stunts. Turning a wide gaze to his friend, he asked, "Not something Elise did, is it?"

Michael reassured him, as they took their respective seats. "Not at all, thank heaven. I never saw her, she was visiting a friend in the village." He sipped from his coffee cup the footman handed him. "Anyway, do you remember that young chestnut stud your under groom was training last summer? Solid, just a small star between the eyes?"

Ren's felt the contents of his breakfast rise. If Elise was up to something he would ring her pretty little neck, then ban her from polite society forever.

"Well, I went to Tatts last week, looking for a new mount, something sensible for town use. I wanted something young and with some life in him still. As I walked past the pens, I saw two men with your livery, one of whom was the lad who rode the chestnut that day. He was with another of your grooms and they were looking for two or three good broodmares of a certain conformation."

Ren nodded and smiled, all the while vowing to kill his sister for luring Michael out to Haldenwood on the pretense of seeing a horse. He thought she was over her childhood infatuation with Michael. The only way to finally get her over this was to marry her off to someone—anyone—as soon as possible.

"I asked your groom how that horse was coming along, and they both raved about what a soft, responsive mouth he had and how he would take the merest shift of seat as a cue. I asked if they'd sold him yet, and the lad assured me he was quite available if I were of a mind to come out and try him.

"They weren't jesting." Michael's eyes lit with excitement as he

spoke, causing Ren a measure of relief. "I rode him for about two hours, and found him to be a most excellent ride. So, I'm now in debt to you for the sum of two hundred pounds. I could talk them down no further."

"Two hundred!" Ren coughed. His sister was over-charging his friend for a well-trained mongrel.

"In their defense, they asked for four hundred. We negotiated a two month stay with you for next summer to breed him to the six mares they just purchased."

"Six mares!" Ren was glad they were headed back to Haldenwood soon. He had to check his sister before she jerked the reins from his grasp.

"Are you well?" Michael asked. "You are repeating everything I say."

"I'm fine." He closed his eyes, exasperated. "I just need an hour or two in the boxing ring."

"Now that you're back, we should meet at Jackson's for a few rounds. I have not been able to find a worthy sparring partner the entire time you were gone."

He nodded, then smiled at his friend. "Enough of that. I have news."

"News of what? I know they have not captured Thomas yet."

Ren stood and took two cigars from the humidor behind his desk, and held one out for Michael. "As you just returned to Town, you likely have not heard. I am wed." Upon seeing his friend's shocked expression, he added, "And I suspect she is already carrying my heir."

"Good God, man, congratulations!" His friend stood and came around to shake his hand. "How and when? Where and who?"

He told Michael the rehearsed version of their meeting, thinking he didn't need to know all the details. He then covered the report from the investigator, Cartland, with him. "Thomas has not surfaced in the nearly five months I've been away." Ren leaned back in his chair and puffed on his cigar. "If the Regent discovered I returned with a wife before the day was through yesterday, then how long can it be before Thomas finds out as well?" He didn't want to think of a life without Lia. "I am very taken with her, Michael, and to protect her, we're leaving for Haldenwood as soon as possible. The day after tomorrow, I hope."

"So soon?" Michael asked, doing the same. "Aren't you going to show off your new wife around Town? Take her to a few balls, soirées, and what-not. You know how women like that sort of thing, and we can hire security for her." His friend grinned, adding, "I cannot wait to see the raised eyebrows once word hits the street." Then as though remembering something grave, his gaze met Ren's steadily, his lips

thinned, and a muscle in his cheek twitched. "By the way, there are a few things you should know, and it would be better that they come from me."

Michael had Ren's full attention. "What now?"

"I think Margaret may cause trouble for you."

Ren's expression hardened in astonishment at hearing the name of his former fiancée. He looked at his long-time friend through narrowed eyes, one brow arched in question.

"While you were gone she led everyone to believe the wedding was only postponed due to her *illness*. She then left for Bath to take the waters. Or to let the gossip die down." His friend sipped from his coffee cup. "Being one of the few who knew the truth, and not one to go about much in society, I said nothing, knowing that when you returned matters would be set aright."

"Damn!" Ren rose from the chair and went to stare out the window facing the street below. He puffed on his cigar as he thought. He didn't need the added aggravation of Margaret upsetting his wife, even though she was aware of the entire situation. "Well, she can try, but she's the one who would lose if she were to attempt to humiliate me. I have a wife now, and soon will have my heir. And even if I weren't married, I would hardly reconsider taking her as my duchess."

Michael continued, "As you requested, I met with Cartland each Monday for a report. There's been no sighting of Thomas. Cartland's got men watching the streets surrounding the Mint for your cousin, as that's where he and his agents think Thomas has gone to ground. But, I'm not so certain. You see, there has been an unconfirmed sighting of him up in Yorkshire, with Margaret, at the home of her sister and brother-in-law."

"It doesn't matter," Ren said. "When he surfaces he will be taken care of."

Michael nodded. "As your legal counsel, it would be remiss of me to not remind you that you are not to take matters into your own hands. Leave him for the authorities."

"I will, unless he is threatening my family or my life. In that case, I am prepared to kill him."

"What of Lady Margaret?" his friend asked.

"She's not my problem. I'm confident she will not cause trouble. Think about it, Michael, she stands to lose more than I, because if the truth were known about her illness, her reputation would be in shreds and no decent man would have her. I did all I could to keep quiet about what happened. You and my grandmother are the only ones who know the whole of what transpired. I left the country within days to avoid the questions, and to let her handle the gossip-mongers. At the time, I just prayed it didn't make the front page of the *Times*."

“It didn’t, which is why so many still believe you have an agreement with her.”

Michael stood and straightened his jacket. “Well, I must be on my way. Hadn’t meant to stay this long, as I have three days of paperwork awaiting me.”

Ren told Michael about the summons he’d received the night before. “Will you be there tonight? I’d like for you to meet my duchess. I know you will like her.”

His friend nodded. “No one is looking forward to this more than I, my friend,” Michael said as the two strode toward the door of Ren’s office.

“Until tonight then.”

“Until tonight,” Michael echoed. Then Ren heard Michael’s laughter down the hall and out the front door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Have someone tell my wife the hour grows late,” Ren snarled at the footman. The man just happened to be the unfortunate soul passing the open drawing room door at that moment. He barely heard the man’s reply as Ren continued his pacing. When he reached the bank of windows at the opposite end of the room, he turned at the slight rustle coming from the hallway. Snapping his watch shut, he lifted his eyes to the sight before him.

“That will be unnecessary, Your Grace.”

Glowing radiantly, skin flawless as his finest porcelain, an angel wrapped in ivory satin and tulle stood in the doorway. Her long dark curls were pulled up on the sides and arranged on top of her head with wispy tendrils curled in front of her ears. She was more beautiful than an angel.

This was his duchess. His wife. His Lia.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” she said softly. “After the modiste left, I was uncomfortable with...,” she tugged at the top of her bodice, then readjusted the fichu. “And, well, I had to find a scarf that would work to cover....”

“The woman came highly recommended. Was her work not to your liking?” he asked.

“No, the woman and her assistants were very accommodating. It’s just that I...” She glanced downward and a rosy glow warmed her cheeks. “The bodice was far too low, and I was unable to raise it. So I had to get...,” he watched her mental search for the correct word, “*creativo*, and fix the problem.”

He couldn’t see that there had been a problem. The satin creation fit her perfectly, hugging her full breasts in a manner that he wished he could at that moment. A fine fichu draped the outer edges of her shoulders, pleated precisely, then came together, disappearing into the square bodice. The skirt and sheer overlay fell loosely to the matching satin slippers.

“Madam DuBorgne always was a trend setter,” Ren took his wife’s hand, placing an intimate kiss in the center of her gloved palm. “Your dress will soon be duplicated by every woman in attendance tonight.”

Lia pulled her hand away and stared at him, her emerald eyes suddenly wide with fear. “I know not where we are going, and with whom we are to dine. How am I to know if I am appropriately attired? Will there be dancing? You have been rather secretive about our evening.”

“We’re just having dinner with a distant relative. And your dress

is perfect. It will surely be all the rage in a day or two.” This seemed to calm her somewhat. “My sweet Lia,” he whispered, as his thumb played lightly over the inside of her wrist. “You are the most beautiful of all women.”

Her lips curved in a slight smile.

“Do you enjoy being told you’re beautiful?”

She turned and looked up at him. “Only by you.”

With his free hand, he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a long rectangular jewelers case. “For my duchess.” Opening it, he showed her its contents, watching her eyes grow in amazement, then close. She took another deep breath, this one obviously to calm herself. When her eyes opened and met his, they were the shimmering green of morning grass with frost still on the tips.

“Your Grace, you must not think I want you to buy me such jewels,” she whispered.

He chuckled. “These are family heirlooms. They belonged to my stepmother, my mother, my grandmother, and every Duchess of Caversham before her, just as they will be worn by the ones to come. As my wife, you are the current keeper of the Caversham jewels.”

Her gaze turned to the book-lined wall, and Ren swore he saw tears forming in her eyes, and he couldn’t understand why. What did she have to cry about? He was giving her diamonds, not a string of sea shells. But when she turned back to him, there were no tears. Her eyes were dry, and she appeared chastised, although he hadn’t intended to sound critical.

“You are right,” she said. “I’m sorry I made assumptions. I should have remembered my place.”

He softened his tone, and stroked her cheek. Where in blazes did she think her place was? “Your place is by my side, as my wife.” He motioned for her to turn, and presenting her back to him, she allowed him access to the smooth nape of her neck. Her roses and musk scent wafted up, and his breeches suddenly felt tight. *Damn*. His lips burned with want to taste her, but he held himself in check, as his arms encircled her neck and laid the diamond necklace in place. He fastened it quickly, removing his hands without touching her more than he had to for fear they’d never make it to their appointed dinner.

“May I have your left hand, wife?” She held out her gloved and trembling hand as he reached into another pocket and removed a tiny leather-encased box. Lifting the lid he set it on the table, and removed the wedding ring that had been his grandmother’s. The square yellow sapphire surrounded by tiny white diamonds looked too large for her hand, but it was all he had for now. As he slid the ring on her finger he made a mental note to find a suitable one that fit her better.

Taking out the final box, he opened it and showed her the

diamond drop earrings. "Do you need help with these?"

"No, I should be able to...." She trailed off as she reached out with a still-shaking hand.

Taking the jewel case, she walked to the gilt-framed looking glass mounted on the foyer wall. Ren followed. Once she had the earrings securely in place, he helped her into her evening pelisse. Lia stepped into it and reached up to fasten the hook beneath her chin. Her hands met his, and she startled, stepping out of his reach. Why did she always refuse his aid?

"I can dress myself," she whispered.

"I'm sure you can." He stepped closer and took the hook and eye clasp from her fingers. "But, I would much rather do this than watch you." His fingers lingered over the fine mesh at the swell of her breasts. "Let me correct that statement," he said as he leaned in and caught a whiff of her perfume. "I'd rather be doing this in the reverse." Her chest rose and fell as she breathed, and Ren wished he could take her to his room for the night, instead of going somewhere he had no desire to go.

"I think we will not be out long. I have discovered I have an ailment that can only be cured by being in bed." He leaned down and placed a tender kiss on her mouth. A light, feathery meeting of lips. A kiss that held the promise of what was to come.

Lia stared in amazement as their carriage entered the drive of a palace unlike any she'd ever seen before. Set back from a very busy street in Pall Mall, and hidden from the traffic by a screen of pillars and trees, was an impressive showcase home for an aristocratic family to be sure.

Once their carriage entered the courtyard, they pulled up the long drive to an expansive Corinthian portico which fronted the house. Their carriage stopped and a liveried footman opened the door. Lia held her expression in check, not wanting to let everyone know she was in awe of her surroundings. They might think her an unworthy bride for her husband. Ren alighted first, then taking her shaking hand in his, he assisted her to the ground.

"No need to be frightened, sweetheart." He placed her hand on his arm. "He is but a man."

"You never told me who we were to dine with this evening, husband. Thus, I have no idea to whom this magnificent home belongs."

"Then you are in for a treat my dear, for this is Carlton House." Ren smiled down at her. She was sure he meant to be reassuring, but she still had no idea with whom they were to dine. Lingering confusion must have graced her brow. "The home of our illustrious

Prince Regent, who is a distant relative,” he clarified.

“Yes, well, I’m related to the Borgias but do not claim the connection.” Another footman held the door open for them. Once in the brightly lit, green and gold foyer, still another finely attired man came forward, first bowing low, then he smiled and greeted them.

“Good evening, Your Graces.”

Her husband nodded a greeting to the man. “Good evening, sir,” Lia replied. Ren gave her a quizzical look, and handed the footman his coat and hat. He then turned to Lia to help her remove her pelisse.

She continued to gape at the luxurious appointments in the entryway of the home as they walked. This portion of the home was magnificently decorated in the current fashionable gold and black Chinese style, with statues set in architectural niches and a glass-domed, tray ceiling painted to match. It took all Lia had to not stare at her sumptuous surroundings, and when she did, she hoped no one noticed.

Another footman led them down a corridor to the left, and held open a door to a grand salon, this with red silk walls and gold and ivory painted trim. Portraits of the Regent’s royal ancestors adorned the walls and a crystal chandelier hung from the center of a painted tray ceiling. A footman stood at the door, as her husband went to a chair and lowered himself to await their host.

She meandered through the room, appreciating the paintings and asked her husband, “Why were we summoned here? You never did say.”

“I’m sure he wishes to meet you, my dear,” her husband said, as he absently studied his manicure.

At the sound of the door opening behind her, Lia turned, and watched as an elderly man entered the room. So this was England’s Prince Regent. With gray curls styled high to make him appear taller, a heavy-set man, dressed in dark burgundy, gold and white, headed directly for her. He was followed by two women and two gentlemen, and the regent waved them away at the door. Lia instinctively drew closer to Ren’s side as he stopped before she and her husband. Ren made the introduction and Lia curtsied low. Holding out his hand to her to assist her rising, she placed her hand in his, and the regent kissed the air above her knuckles.

“My dear Duchess, how wonderful to meet you,” he said. Without releasing her hand, he gave his attention to her husband. “Well, Caversham,” the man said, “I see you’ve finally arrived.” He took in Ren’s attire, then commented, “I don’t see an arm band. I hope you’re not in mourning again.” When her husband didn’t answer, the regent added, “A little color is fashionable too, you know. You should try it sometime.”

Ren took the criticism calmly, stating only, "Wearing one color makes getting dressed so much less complicated."

A uniformed footman bearing a tray with refreshments stopped next to their party, Ren lifted two glasses, handing one to Lia. Taking a long sip, she took a moment to see if anyone else was in the room with them. Other than two guards and a footman, they were alone.

"To what do I owe the honor, Your Majesty?" Ren tucked Lia possessively into the crook of his arm. His voice held an undertone of fashionable boredom. "I haven't been in Town long enough to make the announcement of our marriage. How did you come to hear of it so soon?"

"I have ears everywhere, Caversham." The Prince snapped. "Did you know that Skeffington's daughter is my god-daughter?"

"She mentioned it, yes."

"I understand you have wronged her," the regent stated.

"You have been misinformed Your Majesty. I did no such thing. The lady chose to end her relationship with me, and enter into one with Lord Whitby before any betrothal contracts were signed."

Lia wanted to jump in and defend her husband, but knew this was not something that was done in polite society. So she bit her tongue and continued to listen intently to their conversation.

"Caversham, you led everyone to believe you were going to offer for the girl." When her husband didn't reply. The Regent continued, "The chit's father is my good friend. He swears you cried off over a misunderstanding and that you have gravely and irreparably besmirched his daughter's honor. He's asking for recompense, which if what he's stated is true, he is owed."

"There was no promise to either the father, or the daughter," Ren stated flatly. "They'll not get a shilling from me."

"The man is threatening to take the matter to the courts. Surely paying them off to settle the matter quietly is preferable to the scandal it will bring down on your name." Obviously frustrated with her husband's immovable opinion, the prince added, "Think of your sisters' future if not your own. Let us settle this matter, shall we?"

Her husband refused to reply. And the longer Ren took, the more irritated the older man seemed to get. Sighing deeply, the prince muttered something about her husband bringing judgment down upon himself. "Ten thousand pounds," he stated, "to the father alone." His tone was that of a man who would take no argument.

Lia choked off a gasp, as her husband whispered in amazement, "What?"

"You heard me correctly, Caversham. Ten thousand pounds for the breach of promise to the father. Do that," continued the regent, "and I will turn a blind eye to your irregular marriage."

“Majesty,” Lia interjected, “there is nothing irregular about our marriage. I assure you that we were wed by a priest, in front of witnesses. We have the marriage license and approval of my only relative, my brother.”

“You are Catholic, are you not?” he asked her.

She looked at her husband for some sign as to how he wished her to answer. At his nod, she replied, “Yes, Majesty, I am.”

“Then I can declare your marriage invalid for that reason alone. I could also declare your marriage invalid because your husband did not seek my consent before wedding you.”

Tears welled in Lia’s eyes, but she didn’t allow them to fall. “I will not beg you, Majesty, to leave my marriage intact,” Lia stated flatly. “Just know that I will remain with my husband for as long as he wishes. Legally or otherwise.”

“It is very likely my wife carries my heir as we speak,” he stated. “To invalidate our marriage would force me to marry my wife again, or legitimize my son after his birth.”

“I have no doubt you would do just that. See that the fine I imposed is paid to the girl’s father within the week, or I will allow him to proceed with a legal suit against you.”

Ren nodded to his Prince. “I shall have my attorneys contact his, for a resolution.”

The Prince turned away, seemingly satisfied, and began walking to the door. He stopped and looked back at Lia with a tender smile. “Would that all women were as loyal to their husbands as you.” The Regent turned to her husband and smiled. “Dinner should be a marvelous affair. Come, let’s proceed toward the dining room, shall we?”

Ren took her arm and they followed the regent back down the corridor to the entryway, and on to a drawing room, while they awaited entry into the dining hall. Upon entering the room, her husband’s gaze went toward a man standing with a group of other men. She and Ren began walking in their direction. The stranger excused himself from the group and came toward them.

Tall and handsome, he too wore all black except for his snowy-white shirt and cravat. He also wore trousers, just like her husband. He had thick brown waves, combed back away from his face and soft hazel eyes that told Lia he was now her friend too. She knew she was right when the other man smiled at her husband. This friend of her husband appeared genuine, his mood happy, not forced.

“Michael. I’m glad you’re here,” Ren said. Lia noticed he wore his brown hair longer than fashion dictated, as did her husband. He kissed the back of Lia’s hand, and bowed low.

“Meet my bride, Michael.” Ren turned to her, and with a broad

smile said, "Sweetheart, I'd like for you to meet my very good friend, The Right Honorable Lord Brightman." He turned to his friend, saying "Michael, it is my honor to introduced you to Her Grace, Angelia Serena, The Duchess of Caversham." Pride was evident in his voice. He turned to her and said, "This is Michael, of whom I've spoken to you many times. He's been my friend since school, and is now a partner in some investments as well as my legal advisor."

"That just means I know all his secrets," Michael said, before he kissed her hand. "And, the pleasure is all mine, Your Grace." He turned back to Ren. "What ever did she see in you that she agreed to be your bride?"

"My charm and my good looks," Ren replied quickly. "You know, the things you have none of." The two men laughed.

"What kept you? I thought you'd have been here before me," Michael asked.

"We have been in a meeting with the regent for the past fifteen minutes," her husband replied. "My wife has the regent smitten."

"He threatens my marriage and you say he's smitten?" Lia shook her head. "What would he say if he didn't find favor with me, Your Grace?"

"Since that would never happen, darling," her husband said, "we shall never know."

Just then they were called into the dining room and Ren held out an arm to lead her in the procession. Michael walked alongside Ren, asking him something Lia couldn't hear. She saw her husband shake his head in the negative. "We can talk about it later," Ren said.

This room, as all the others she'd seen in Carlton House, was magnificently decorated. The room boasted red velvet curtains which framed the windows and a generous amount of gold trim on the ceiling and walls. One end of the room had a wall inlaid with mirrors, giving the impression of the room being that much larger. The dining table alone had to be fifty feet long, with some sixty or more place settings completely around it. Eight chandeliers hung overhead, four on each side of the room. Extra lighting was provided by the three candelabras in the center of the wide dining table. At least twenty liveried footman stood along the wall waiting for orders to begin serving, as platter after platter continued to arrive into the room.

Once they'd found their seats, Lia leaned over to her husband and whispered, "I've never seen anything such as this in all my life!"

"Relax darling, and enjoy the evening. After dinner we will stay a short while, then make our excuses. I would like to get an early start for home in the morning."

Lia nodded, as a platter-bearing footman, set an appetizer before her. Little did she know that it was the first of several tiny appetizers,

and by the time the last little dish was taken from her setting, she was full.

And still the food came. Footmen served course after course of their dinner next, some of the most delicate, beautifully prepared foods she'd ever seen, most of it drenched in a heavy cream sauce of some sort. For some reason this night, her stomach couldn't hold much, and after only two or three bites of each, Lia pushed her plate away, crossing her flatware on her dish, signaling she was done with that course.

This went on for over an hour. After the third or fourth course, she gave up trying to taste each one presented, realizing there was no possible way she could attempt another bite. Two hours after entering the room, they were freed from the dining hall. Beautiful though it was, it had become a living hell for Lia who wanted nothing more than to seek a chamber pot, fearing the need to relieve her increasingly upset stomach.

As they walked back to the grand salon, she stumbled. Sensing something was amiss with his wife, Ren turned to her.

"Are you alright?" His voice was gentle and concerned.

"Yes, but I must seek relief," she whispered into his ear as he leaned forward.

From nowhere a footman appeared and led Lia down a corridor to a private room. Once inside, she closed the door and made for the chamber pot, barely reaching it in time to lose everything she'd just eaten. A maid appeared, handing her a damp kerchief which she used to wipe her face.

Upon hearing a noise, she lifted her eyes to the mirror to see Lady Jersey watching her. Lia straightened her appearance, handed the maid the wet cloth, and stood, intending to return to her husband's side.

The older woman smiled. "It's sure to be a girl, Your Grace. I hear they give you problems from the moment of conception."

"Oh, I doubt I could be thus blessed so soon," Lia replied. "It's likely the quantity of food I consumed."

Lady Jersey smiled. "Perhaps." She rubbed her belly and confessed, "As I'm about to present my husband his fourth child this autumn, I'm starting to feel somewhat of an authority. You see, I've never once been sick. With each ordeal the old midwife said it was a son. The first two times I wouldn't believe her. All three times she was right."

Lia wondered why this woman whom she'd just met hours earlier would intrude on something so personal and private. "Even if I were, what is a few months of discomfort," Lia said, "when in the end you hold a tiny miracle? I was raised to believe every child is a blessing, a

gift given to a man and woman who love each other.”

The other woman sat on the stool at the dressing table and stretched her feet before her. “I’m sure you are right. But everyone knows of Caversham’s urgent need for a son.”

“When that time comes, my husband and I will be thankful for a healthy child—son or daughter.” Lia turned to leave the closed confines of the retiring room. “If you’ll excuse me, my husband was hoping to leave early this evening.” She nodded to the other woman, and the maid opened the door for her.

Once in the hallway, she spied a secluded alcove and lowered herself onto the chaise inside. Lia thought for a moment. It was possible, after all they have been intimate quite frequently with the express purpose of begetting his heir. Perhaps that was why she’d been so sick lately.

Even though he told the Regent he suspected, she had to tell her husband before he heard from someone else. Since they had a day-long ride in a traveling coach tomorrow, she would take the opportunity to break the news to her husband.

Yes, she’d have to do it soon, because Lia was sure Lady Jersey would be spreading tales of her condition to any and all who would listen before the night was over.

In the Grand Salon an hour later, after meeting dozens of women in the highest echelon of English society, Lia laid her head on Ren’s chest, and he held her there, lightly stroking the line of buttons running up her spine. She looked up at him with her dark-fringed green eyes, and he saw fatigue written across her beautiful face.

“Let’s get you home sweetheart. We’ve stayed long enough.” Turning to Michael, he said, “Come with us? We can continue our earlier conversation in private.” Ren led Lia down the corridor to the entryway, where he called for his carriage.

“Certainly,” replied Michael. “I’ll have my carriage follow.”

Once ensconced in the deep gray velvet squabs, it was no time at all before his wife was asleep in his arms. When Ren knew she slept, he turned to Michael. “He’s ordered me to pay off Skeffington for breach of promise.”

“If you want,” Michael offered, “we can fight it. Margaret was unfaithful, if not with your cousin Thomas, then with someone. That much is true.”

“We cannot call Thomas to the stand if we cannot find him,” Ren countered. “And Margaret would lie to protect herself, so it would be Margaret’s word against mine. Were there witnesses? A midwife?”

“The old woman who attended her in Bath died several weeks later. It appeared to be natural causes.”

“How fortunate for Margaret,” Ren muttered.

“All we would have is a second-hand accounting of the now-deceased mid-wife consulting with your own physician when Margaret was delirious with fever afterward.”

“Prescott is an honorable man. I would trust his word.”

Michael nodded. “So how much did the rigged-out peacock fleece you for?”

“Ten thousand pounds. To the father. Payable within the week.”

Michael let out a soft whistle. “Good God. Not an insignificant amount, is it?”

“I’m actually considering paying it,” Ren said.

“So there would be no court case?” When Ren nodded, Michael continued, “Not a bad idea, especially when you consider the effect of a scandal on the girls. But realize, this does not take care of your problem with Thomas.”

Ren cuddled Lia closer, enjoying her warm softness, as their coach wove its way through early morning London traffic.

“I understand, Michael. Believe me, I will never allow him to come within a mile of my wife. As much as it might pain me to kill my kin, I will.”

“I didn’t hear that,” his friend and solicitor said.

“And I didn’t say it,” Ren whispered, as he stroked his wife’s glove-encased arm.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lia stirred and snuggled deeper into the warmth of the blankets, hugging the pillow closer. She opened one eye and saw the deep even breathing of her husband beside her, thankful he still slept. Last night he'd played the part of a man in love, fulfilling his role in order to pull the wool over the eyes of society. Making them all believe theirs was a happy union was important, so that their marriage would not be contested by the crown, thus invalidating it and this child if she was truly carrying his heir.

There was a movement next to her and she feigned sleep as best she could. Ren's warm, gentle hand caressed her bare waist, sliding around her, pulling her closer into the curve of his body. She held her breathing steady, as he attempted to wake her with his feather-soft caresses.

As difficult as it was, she continued to pretend sleep, because she didn't want his loving this morning. There was so much to think about, discuss and plan. She needed her wits about her, not her husband on top of her.

She felt the bed dip as he came to rest on his elbow, and turned her over. He stared at her. Lia squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to meet his gaze. "I know you're not asleep," Ren whispered. "You haven't been for quite some time." A hand came forward to gently brush the hair back from her face.

Rubbing her eyes awake, she looked up at him and asked, "What makes you think that?"

"You have been in my bed now for over a month. I notice a lot of things."

Her eyes must have given her away, because he smiled.

"I wasn't wrong last night, was I, when I told the prince you may be carrying my child?"

"I'm not sure yet. I think it's too soon," she said.

"You have had some sickness though, and that is a sign, is it not?"

Lia nodded. "But that could just be stress from our travels finally catching up with me. I will have to think back to my last..." She felt color rising in her cheeks. "I will have to remember when..."

"To when you last had your monthly flux?" His eyes danced with mirth, and a grin spread across his face.

"You, sir, are beyond resembling a gentleman," she said, pushing his hand away from her breast.

"I could call my physician to verify your delicate state, if you so choose." He lifted his arm and placed it behind his head on the pillow,

grinning mischievously.

"It truly is too soon." No sooner had the words left her mouth, than she scrambled from the bed to run across the room and hide behind her screen. Reappearing minutes later, she gave her husband a wan smile. "We *have* been trying."

"Rather diligently," he grinned, holding the covers for her to climb back under.

Ren's index finger trailed a light, almost reverent, path from the lower lip, over her chin, down the sensitive skin of her neck, and into the valley between her breasts, finally resting the palm of his hand gently over her abdomen, in the same spot where, if there were a child, the babe would now be growing. "I am very pleased, wife." His expression changed, and he sighed. "We must get you home quickly. You will have more room to move about the house and garden as the entire estate is currently under guard to protect my grandmother and sisters. I haven't been overly concerned about their safety because there is nothing to be gained by harming them and he knows this. But you...", their gazes met and she understood his fear. "You will be a target. I must get you home to safety. And once we reach Haldenwood, our family physician, Prescott, will have to be notified. I want you to have the best medical care during this time." Her husband beamed with pride. He sat up in the bed, "We should hurry, too. I would not want you to summer in Town, where it can get hot and smelly. The country air is better for you and the babe."

The entire time he went on about leaving London, she fought another surge of bile rising. She ran for the pot again, and when she reappeared from behind the screen she collapsed in a heap on the floral pattern rug when everything went black. She awoke to her husband's voice calling for someone to fetch the physician.

"I am well, really. I just need a bath and some rest."

"Prescott will determine if you are well, and if you're able to travel," her husband argued.

Ghita entered the room with some lukewarm tea and a slice of toast. Her husband sat at her side on the bed, and watched as she sipped from the cup and nibbled from the bread. When she'd had enough, she motioned for him to remove the tray, then lay back down to rest.

An hour later brought a knock to her door. Her husband crossed the room to open it. A gray-haired gentleman of medium height and build, soft-spoken and wizened, crossed the carpet to her bedside.

"I hear congratulations are due, Your Grace," the man said to her husband. Turning to her, he said, "Your Grace, my most sincere felicitations on your marriage."

What followed was an inquisition unlike any she'd ever

experienced. Of course, she'd never been with child either. In the end the physician proclaimed her a normal expectant mother with a babe due around the turn of the year.

"Of course, for safety's sake, I'd like to see you remain abed for the next few months."

"Can I bring her home to Haldenwood, and put her on bed rest there?" her husband asked.

"I'll not argue that fresh country air is preferred for the good of her health, but travel must be very slow with frequent breaks. Do not jostle the babe." His brown eyes bored into hers, "No stairs while you are having dizzy spells, Your Grace," he stressed. "The morning sickness could last a few months or the entire duration. Eat what you can keep down, and I will see you in a few weeks, unless needed sooner."

As the physician wrote his notes, Ren excused himself and went into the hallway. Lia took the opportunity to ask the physician a question about something he hadn't addressed during the interview and instructions. Satisfied with his reply, she thanked the man, and made small talk while he finished gathering his bag. Her husband returned just as the physician picked up his belongings and looked at her husband and smiled. "I delivered you when I was fresh out of medical school, and now I have the pleasure of seeing your child delivered. This is a good day, Your Grace. A good day, indeed."

"Thank you, Prescott, you have relieved my mind." He shook the man's hand and pat the physician on the back. "Cook is putting together a basket of those cherry tarts you like so much."

"It just so happens I have room in here," the elderly man pat his flat belly, "for one or two of those."

Her husband chuckled. "Before this child is born you will have gotten plump on those tarts because I will see to it you have as many as you want." Ren turned to her and gave her a wink, then followed the physician from the room.

When the door shut behind them, Lia scrambled from the bed again and dashed behind the screen. This time Ghita was there to help her. She looked at her maid and said, "Never bring a fruit tart near me. Just the thought of how it smells is enough to make me sick."

Ghita assisted her back to bed and soon she slept.

Ren shared a table in the dining room at his club with Michael and one of his father's friends, Lord Hepplewhite. The foreign office official happened to be on his way home to Wallingford from a stay at his current post in Portugal. The man's home was not far from Haldenwood, and his lordship's only child, a daughter, was Elise's best friend, Lady Beverly Hepplewhite.

"I must hurry home, Your Grace, or I would take you up on your offer to travel with you. It seems my daughter's most recent governess has suddenly quit my employ for an unknown reason. I shall now have to hire another quickly so I may return to my office."

"I understand your concern for her welfare, and your desire not to bring her with you while you travel about the continent. My offer of having Lady Beverly remain with us is sincere and open-ended."

"Your Grace, the offer is generous," said the silver-haired diplomat. "I just may have to take you up on it, as you know there is no female relation to stay with her."

"My grandmother and now my wife will both be in the home to provide female guidance to both Lady Beverly and my sisters."

His friend stifled a snort, and Ren bumped him with the toe of his shoe. He remembered his joyful news and with barely a lift of his hand, he had a waiter at his side and asked the man for a bottle of his favorite Spanish red wine.

Michael raised a brow, and Ren said, "Tonight, gentlemen, we drink to my lady wife who shall present me with a child for Christmas."

"Congratulations, Your Grace!" Lord Hepplewhite cheered, turning the heads of the dozen or so patrons in the club that evening. Michael chimed in and congratulated him, then handed him a cigar. Soon Hepplewhite was off to a hotel, as his home had been let for the season, leaving he and Michael alone.

At half-six in the evening, it was too early for the dinner crowds, too late for tea, and the club was only sparsely populated. Populated with just the right group of gossips sure to help his news spread.

"This might work," Michael said as he scanned the room. "The entire time you were gone, he was seen perhaps a couple of times. We're not sure how, but he slipped in and out Southwark without anyone capturing him."

Ren nodded. "We leave for Haldenwood in a few days, for Lia and the babe's well-being. We will be heavily guarded, but I expect him to come out." He scanned the room to make sure no one paid attention to them, "I want him to slip up, Michael. Badly."

"Be careful what you wish for my friend," Michael said.

"I need to have him in custody or dead. That will be the only way I can sleep comfortably."

Two mornings later, his wife was still not well enough to travel. Ren sat in his study going over the household accounts from when he was away, and making arrangements with his secretary to have them paid. He looked up when the owner of the security firm he hired, Mr. Cartland, entered the room.

"Good morning, Your Grace," he said. "I must have a word with

you, if you please.”

The man looked around the room and Ren understood his meaning. He dismissed his secretary and the footman, and when the door had closed behind them and they were alone, he prompted the man to speak.

“Are there any new maids in this home, kitchen, household, or scullery? I ask because it has come to my attention that Lord Whitby was seen talking to a woman in a maid’s uniform, on a busy street corner yesterday eve. He slipped through our grasp yet again, but the maid we questioned said the gent was looking to hire someone to work on this very block. She responded to his advertisement for employment because she is unhappy in her current situation, and wanted to verify the job existed before she quit her current post.”

“Did she take the job?”

“No,” the investigator replied. “She wanted to give proper notice to her employer so as to get a reference. She’s a proud housemaid who has worked her way up from the scullery, and is the conscientious sort. Whitby told her he didn’t care about her references and wanted her to start that day. The young maid said his demeanor spooked her off and she refused.”

Ren went to the door and asked a footman to locate Niles and Mrs. Steen. When the two arrived, he asked them about newly hired employees and neither said they were looking for help, nor had they hired any recently. He turned back to Cartland. “I shall check with my staff when we arrive at Haldenwood in a few days, to make certain the same is true there. I can furlough anyone hired after the shooting with pay until this is resolved. Which shouldn’t be too much longer, from the looks of it.”

The day for traveling to Haldenwood dawned cold and misty. After eating a plain breakfast of tea and toast, Lia supervised the packing of her few necessities, then went to her brother’s room to do the same. Ghita made certain the new sewing kit Lia asked for got into the correct coach, as Lia was going to attempt needlework now that she was expecting a child. Mrs. Steen and Ghita both said it was what ladies did when they were carrying. Lia was just thankful that the things she was about to embroider were napkins to be used on the child’s bottom, and not something seen by anyone other than the babe’s nurse.

More and more, she dreaded the next eight months. She was miserable already and couldn’t imagine feeling so run down while getting larger. If the doctor’s calculations were correct, the babe would be born just after Christmas, which gave her plenty of time to prepare the dressing gowns, linen napkins, blankets, and bed clothing

needed for the babe's first months.

Her brother and Ghita rode in a separate coach. When she asked why, her husband replied, "Your brother and his puppy are too rambunctious to have them in here with you. Prescott wanted you to have a safe, quiet ride."

She didn't agree, but accepted his decision. Lia then took her needlework out and began to embroider the corners of the baby napkins. On one corner she placed a tiny letter "C." On the opposing corner she put either a lamb, pony, puppy, kitten, or rabbit. On one napkin, a lamb came out looking like a kitten, on another, a pony had donkey ears. But to Lia, it didn't matter. Simply making the baby's things relaxed her and helped her pass the time, for while she learned to embroider, her love for her child grew with each stitch.

Two hours easily passed, while her husband read contracts and ledgers, making notes where necessary. She looked up when he tapped her knee with a finger. His grinning countenance was so handsome, she thought.

"We'll be stopping in a clearing some yards ahead." He motioned toward a copse of trees in the distance.

Lia nodded and set her needle into the cloth safely, while the two coaches and several horsemen, pulled into a grassy clearing. She dropped her embroidery hoop on the seat next to her, and watched eight guards on horseback remain mounted and in position, blocking them from the road. The door opened and a groom came up to let down the stairs.

Her husband exited first, then held out an ungloved hand for her. "I can let myself down," she insisted.

"You'll do no such thing. Prescott said you were to be careful of falling. Now take my hand," he ordered.

She refused and soon regretted it, for he lifted her, then set her carefully on the ground. Even when she stood, his hands lingered at her waist.

"I'm fine. You can let go now." His hands fell from her waist, and he took her hand and led her across the clearing. When they reached an appropriate cover, she asked, "May I have some privacy?" she asked when it appeared he might come behind the bushes with her.

"Certainly. I'll turn my back after I assure myself there's nothing there to hurt you."

"Oh, what could there be out here with all this noise?"

"A wild animal?" he said, toying with her.

After Lia had taken care of her more urgent needs, she emerged from behind the bushes, to see her brother running toward them, the puppy on a rope bouncing alongside him. One thick, dark curl fell onto his forehead and he brushed it aside haphazardly.

He didn't stop at all, but as he flew by, handed her the lead attached to the puppy, saying "Lia, will you walk Brutto for me?" Not waiting for her reply, her brother immediately disappeared behind the bushes she'd just come from.

Ren took the rope from her hand saying, "He's going to be an enormous beast. I think he may be part bulldog, and part small horse. I've heard cook say he eats like one."

"My brother, or the puppy?" she said, smiling. She still felt an endless joy at having her brother back safely.

Her husband chuckled. "Both."

As she walked next to him, she wrapped her shawl around herself tighter and said, "I have thanked God daily that you believed me, and took a chance that what I was telling you was true."

Ren stopped as the pup began to roll in the grass. He smiled before looking over at her and saying, "I have wondered myself at that. And all I can think of is that no one could fake the kind of fear and upset you displayed that night." He lifted her hand to his lips, adding, "I, too, am glad that I took that chance."

Luchino returned, took the pup, and led it back to where their coaches waited. Ren offered his arm and she placed her hand on it. Assisting her again, he supported her as she climbed into the coach, and for a moment his hands lingered on her waist. Something flickered in his dark metallic eyes and before she could make out what it was, he closed them.

Once she was situated again in her seat, she pulled her hoop back onto her lap and began working again, as did her husband. With each pass of the needle, she raised the courage to ask him the thing that had been bothering her the past few nights. She wanted to know why he'd avoided her bed, and had to let him know that she wouldn't tolerate him keeping a mistress.

The coaches pulled onto the road again, and casually, as though it were nothing of importance, she asked, "Why have you not slept in my bed with me these past nights?"

Ren looked up from the ledger he'd been working in, and gave her a curious look. "I thought that if you weren't feeling well, I would sleep next door until you were."

Each time she thought of their agreement, she wondered if he would continue to desire her after she'd delivered the necessary heir. Yes, he promised not to separate her from her child, but she didn't think she could tolerate him abandoning her in the country while he kept a mistress in Town.

Lia wanted to tell him how she felt. She shifted in the seat, nervous of what his reaction would be. He could quite simply ignore her wishes and do what he will, after all, most men did. But she had

to let him know how displeased she would be if he went against her wishes. "I think that perhaps I should mention something to you. It isn't something I knew about myself until just this morning, and I already feel very strongly about it."

"And what is that, wife?"

"I feel very strongly that you not entertain thoughts of keeping a mistress." There she got it out, and he didn't appear angry with her. In fact, he was smiling.

"I do not currently have a mistress and I have no thoughts of acquiring one."

"No visiting the ah..." She tapped her finger on her leg, trying to think of the English word for a whorehouse. "*Come si dice*," she whispered, "*bordello*, either."

"I will never visit another *bordello* again," he said, trying to hide his smile. He wasn't taking this as seriously as she, Lia could tell.

"Your needs are mine to care for. They are not the responsibility of another."

"I agree, wife."

His dark silver eyes and crooked smile told her he was up to no good. She wasn't sure if he was placating her, or not. But when he moved his stack of papers and ledgers to the other seat, then reached for her to bring her to his side of the coach, she smiled. "Good. Never forget that you are mine."

"As you are mine." He kissed her forehead, then backed away to look into her eyes, his look turning serious. Her heart skipped a beat as she worried what he was going to say. "I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you that I have begun an account in your name at our banking house, so that you have complete and total control over all funds you inherited. Both yours and your brother's." Shock washed over her leaving her speechless, and he asked, "Are you alright?"

Overcome at the generosity of his gift, she could only nod. When she found her tongue, she said "I never expected.... I mean, that is very generous of you, Your Grace."

Her husband nuzzled the spot beneath her ear and whispered, "You're welcome, Your Grace."

Several hours later, the coach rolled into an inn yard. The proprietor stepped out, wiping his beefy hands on the apron around his waist. "Welcome, welcome, Captain... er, Yer Grace." The portly old man grinned, revealing three missing teeth. "It's wonderful to see ye again."

"Hello, John, good to see you as well. Is our room prepared?"

"Of course. My Bridget's bringing up the food now."

"Sweetheart, this is John Donnelly, currently proprietor of The Drunken Boar, formerly my Quartermaster on *Warlock*." Ren led her

forward, "John, my wife, the Duchess of Caversham."

Mr. Donnelly turned to her and bowed, "Ye must be a special woman indeed to have landed the Cap'n fer husband."

"That she is, John. I had to marry her quick, before she changed her mind and decided she didn't want me after all." Lia wanted to believe he was as proud as he sounded. That he adored her as much as his body told her he did..

"Ye'll find everything made ready in yer rooms. Timmy'll care for your 'orses."

In the corner of the yard, a boy talked with her brother. He appeared to be about Luchino's age, and both came running forward.

"Timmy, help the grooms with the horses. Water 'em down and give 'em some hay," the proprietor said.

"Yes sir," the lad said.

"Can I help him, Lia?" her brother asked in Italian.

"Aren't you hungry?" Lia asked.

"Sì," her brother replied casually as he stood next to his new friend, "but I can eat later."

"Why don't you eat first, then come out and help," she suggested.

Her brother turned to the other boy and said slowly, in proper English, "Do not start until I return. I shall eat fast."

"There will be plenty to help with after ye eat, lad, I assure you," the proprietor told her brother.

Ren led her into the building, and Luchino followed behind. Once they were situated in an upstairs room, true to his word, her brother ate quickly. Lia was sure he could not have tasted the food he'd been served, for within minutes his plate was clean and he was asking for permission to be excused.

"Go on," Ren said. "Stay within sight of the building, and out of trouble."

Lia understood the boy's desire to be with others his own age, and was happy that he found someone to play with. After a few bites of her stew, she pushed around the chunks of potato, carrots, and beef on her plate, suddenly full.

"You barely ate a thing," her husband said.

"I'm not that hungry."

"Are you feeling well?"

"I'm fine." She rubbed her forehead. "A little tired. I think it's due to all this traveling lately."

"After we reach Haldenwood, you'll be staying put for quite a while," Ren said. "For your own good and that of our babe."

Lia sighed, giving her husband a tired smile. "I look forward to that." Standing, she stretched upward first, then forward, to relieve the aching muscles in her back. Taking a seat on the edge of the four-

poster bed, she sank into the downy mattress, making herself comfortable in the middle.

"We don't have to leave if you're not up to it. I'm sure John would love to have us stay the night."

"Oh, no. We should keep moving to make it to your home by dark. Just give me a few minutes and I'll be as fresh as the dawn."

Lia woke hours later to find that the sun hung low in the sky, and she'd slept away the entire afternoon. Three candles lit the room and Ren sat in a chair near the bed, head bent low, for he too slept. She silently slipped from the bed, retrieved her boots and carried them out, not wanting to disturb him. Her husband was probably as tired as she had been, and could use the rest. Once she'd made it down the stairs, she sat on the bottom step, and put her shoes back on.

She stood as Mr. Donnelly came around the corner, his arms laden with linens. He startled when he saw her.

"Mr. Donnelly, sir, have you seen my brother?"

"He and Timmy're out back playin' with the dogs. Though they'll be comin' in soon as it's gettin' too dark to play out."

She thanked the man and headed to the back door of the inn when she heard her husband's heavy-booted footfall coming down the steps. She stopped and looked up to see him coming toward her.

When he reached her, he placed a chaste kiss on her cheek, and hooked her arm through his. "You're looking refreshed," he said. "Would you like to take a walk around the yard?"

"Is it safe?"

"Very," he replied.

John Donnelly, hearing her question, said, "The cap'n's got guards posted all around the place. No one's coming onto the property until after ye leave tomorrow."

Without giving her a chance to decline, he led her out the door. "We'll have dinner when we return, John."

"Aye, Cap'n Yer Grace," Mr. Donnelly replied.

Ren led her around to the back of the inn, where the boys were demonstrating how two of Timmy's dogs fetched sticks in the deepening twilight.

"Hey, Lia, watch!" Luchino and Timmy threw short fat sticks as far as they could, and the bigger dogs ran after them, with Brutto chasing behind. The beasts came running back, holding sticks in their jaws. Each boy reached into a pocket and gave the dogs a treat.

Her brother turned to her, his eyes bright with pride and excitement. "Brutto is very smart. He's learning these tricks fast," Luchino said. "Timmy taught me how. It's easy."

"Remember, Luchino, he's still a pup, do not over tire him."

When the two boys turned to walk away, she heard Timmy say, "I

thought you said your name was Lucky?"

She didn't hear her brother's response as she was being led by her handsome husband to a wooden bench beneath an ancient, spreading oak tree, where he pulled her down on his lap.

"I can perfectly well sit beside you." Lia attempted to leave the grasp of his arms, but he held her close.

"I'd rather you sit on my lap. You haven't done so in a while."

"Because we both know where that usually leads." She removed his arm and sat next to him. "And right now, I'm watching my brother play. Which I haven't been able to do in quite a while." She looked at the two armed men at the edge of the inn yard.

He turned to face her on the bench. "The reason for all the guards is two days ago, the agents discovered Thomas in the park across from our house. He's growing bolder and getting good at disappearing when he knows he's being chased. I don't have time to figure out how, but know that I will not chance that something should happen to you or the babe."

"Your heir, you mean."

His hand caressed the still-flat belly beneath her breasts. "No. Our child." Her husband took a deep breath before continuing. "You would both be safer at Haldenwood. It is easier to protect you from Thomas there." She looked at him curiously, wondering how that was possible. He soon added, "In London, it is difficult to protect you in a crowd, or in public. You cannot be expected to remain indoors always, Thomas knows this. And London is Thomas' lair. He is intimately familiar with the city's underbelly, and those who reside with him there.

"At Haldenwood, there are many servants, faithful to my family, who would protect you both from harm. There are already guards on the premises protecting my sisters and grandmother."

"I see," she said as she turned away from him. "Now I understand the need for the heavy security while we travel."

He drew her onto his lap, holding her close, his arms enveloping her in his great warmth. He cradled her there in complete silence for several minutes, his lips pressed to her temple, as she watched the two boys playing in the distance.

"I have missed you these past few nights, wife."

"I've not been far." She gave him a slight smile. "Why have you really stayed away? I was beginning to think you had no more need for me now that I've conceived your child."

"Never that, Lia, I assure you." He chuckled, and she looked into his eyes, he seemed almost embarrassed in his discomfort, but she wanted to know. She quirked a brow, unwilling to let him off the hook for his absence. "You may find this ignorant or irrational, but...", he hesitated, obviously uncomfortable. He looked away, toward the boys

who sat on a fence a few yards away. "I'm afraid of hurting you or the babe. I wanted to ask Prescott, but was afraid he'd think me a dunderhead, and knew not who else to ask."

"Why not ask me?"

"Because I assumed most women wanted the time away from their husband's attentions." He stroked her forearm lightly, his nerves preventing him from looking in her eyes.

"Not me," she told him, amazed he hadn't said anything about this concern sooner. "I am not most women. While you were seeing to Prescott's cherry tarts, I asked him just that question. He left it up to me." She pressed her cheek to his and whispered into his ear, "I feel wonderful."

Their gazes locked for a moment, and his eyes darkened with desire. Ren nodded and placed feather-light kisses on her lips and cheeks. "Our dinner awaits," he said.

"Or we can have desert before dinner," she whispered into his ear.

He appeared shocked at her offering. "Are you sure?"

Lia nodded. Ren lifted her effortlessly, and carried her across the yard, issuing orders as they passed the guard. Something in her breast fluttered with excitement at the fact he still wanted and desired her, even when the goal of a child had already been achieved. She gave her brother thirty more minutes of play. "We won't need more than that right now," she told him. He took her through the inn and up to their room, passing the small dining room where their meal waited.

Ren locked the door to their room after setting her down. Lia quickly removed her boots and unlaced her pantalettes, dropping them to the floor. "We don't have time to remove all our clothes," she said as she climbed onto the bed. Ren managed the buttons on his breeches, but had difficulty with his boots.

"Come, quickly!" She bunched her skirts around her waist, and parted her legs for him. With breeches and drawers around his knees, unable to remove them because of the boots, he climbed onto the bed and explored the deepest and most private parts of her with his hand first, then with his mouth, driving her to the brink before moving over her. He entered her gently, but she wanted more. She needed to feel the full length of him inside her, touching with his rigid flesh where his fingers had caressed only minutes before.

Lifting her legs, she wrapped them around Ren's hips to allow him deeper access. He groaned as she met each of his thrusts with one of her own. When he moved inside her, his strokes created magic within her, and it wasn't long before he catapulted her to the edge of sanity—where she soared. She felt her husband tense above her and thrust deeply one last time, as he climaxed as well.

She gave him a lazy, satisfied smile. "I told you we wouldn't need more time than that."

He eased himself out of her, rolled over, and pulled her into his arms. His warm breath tickled the baby fine hairs at her temple as he worked to control his breathing. "Yesterday I longed to tell you how beautiful you are. You already glow if that is possible."

"You're seeing things. I'm a woman who gets sick at the smell of cook's cherry tarts."

"I won't tell her," he said. "Or, we just won't have cherry tarts for the duration." One of his hands rested on the curve of her hip as she sat on the edge of the bed. When his palm slid forward to rest reverently over her womb, he said. "I am very pleased." He stroked her belly lovingly as their gazes met. "You must take care Lia, for the new Marquess Glencairn lies within," he said as their eyes met.

"I know," she said rising.

Lia delighted in the fact that he still desired her in this way. Hopefully he would continue to as she grew larger and more round. And she realized something else.

She loved him. She didn't know when or how, but sometime over the past few weeks, she'd fallen in love with him. Lia knew it was too soon for Ren, because his thoughts were still focused on capturing his cousin and keeping them safe.

The sound of a child in boots coming up the stairs shattered the wondrous tranquility of the room. As they grew closer, Lia jumped from the bed and snatched her drawers and tossed them under the pillow, then rearranged the covers before checking her appearance in the mirror. Just as she did the child turned the knob only to find the door locked. Ren stiffened as the person on the other side then pounded.

"Who in hell...." Ren growled.

"Lia? Lia, are you in there?"

Lia stayed her husband with her hand. "*Sì, Luchino. Uno momento.*"

Ren stared at her while he managed the buttons on the front of his breeches. "Is this how he normally enters a room?"

As he worked the ribbon, she said, "Please, he's only a child. I shall speak with him."

"He will be taught manners." His voice told her he would tolerate no argument on the subject.

When her husband nodded, Lia unlocked the door and let her brother in. His mop of curly dark hair was damp from sweat, and he had that pungent smell of a child that had been playing outdoors. It was a cross between wet dog and a freshly plowed field after a brief rain shower. As he passed she had to place her hand delicately and

discreetly over her nose.

“Why is your door locked, Lia? Are you punished?”

“No, I am not punished. His Grace and I wanted some privacy.”

“Oh,” he said matter-of-factly. “Let’s go eat. I’m hungry.”

“While you’re eating, a bath will be delivered to the room across the hall. Please make use of it. Ask Ghita to help you,” Lia said. “You stink.”

“Where am I sleeping tonight?” he asked, without so much as a response to her request that he bathe.

“You will sleep across the hall,” her husband replied for her, “with your sister’s maid.”

Lia looked at him, worried about her brother’s safety. Ren nodded his head. “He will be fine.”

“Lia,” her brother said, “where are you going to sleep?”

“She will be sleeping in my room, with me,” Ren replied.

“Ugh! Why do you want to do that?” Luchino asked Ren, a look of incredulity on his face. “She makes you say prayers before you can go to sleep. She even snores sometimes.”

“I do not!”

“Yes you do,” her brother replied. “You just can’t hear yourself snore because you’re sleeping. But I used to hear it all the time at home.”

Suddenly her brother’s eyes grew wide and filled with tears. She knew he remembered their days in Naples, before the death of their parents. She wrapped her arms around him to comfort him. He tried so hard to be a little man, but he still had a child’s heart. One which bore many scars from the past year. She kissed the top of his sweaty head, and ruffled his curls.

“*Ora, tutto é buono*, Luchino,” she whispered. “All is well. Mama and Papa are watching over us right this minute. And Maura. Too. Do not doubt that they love us. I don’t.”

Upon entering the little dining room just beyond the base of the steps, a Caversham footman served their dinner. Her brother ate with gusto, and when he finished his plate of food Ren had the footman show him his room where the bath waited. When they were alone Ren turned to her and took her into his arms. His broad chest and strong arms comforted her, she drew her strength from him. He stroked her cheek lightly with a finger, then placed a kiss on her forehead.

He gently tilted her face up to his, and smiled a mischievous grin at her. “Will you make me say my prayers before bedtime, wife?”

The next morning her husband awakened her before sunrise. Not to love her again, but to give her a few spare moments, so it seemed to Lia, to ready herself for the rest of their journey to his home.

“If you wish to sleep more, I can help make you comfortable in the coach. We’ll be traveling slowly again.” He helped her onto the seat and wrapped a blanket around her legs, making sure to tuck the sides under her. “Prescott would have my hide if after all we’ve been through to see to the babe’s health, I now take chances by bouncing you around in transit.”

The babe’s health. His words served to remind her what his primary desire was. Their child. Granted, she had known this all along, but she couldn’t help wanting him to love her as a man loves a wife. Especially since she now knew she loved him.

Laying her head back, she soon dozed off to complete her interrupted sleep. As comfortable as it was, the coach wasn’t nearly as soft and warm as the inn’s bed, with Ren’s arms wrapped around her.

And their babe.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A towering canopy of ancient oaks lined both sides of the gravel drive like a regiment of veteran soldiers. The road itself seemed to stretch for an eternity, and with every inch the coach traveled, Lia's nervousness became more pronounced. She gave up her attempt at a decent stitch on the baby blanket, and dropped the hoop down on the seat next to her with a huff. Looking at her husband, she decided she admired his ability to remain unruffled in any situation. The man never got nervous or upset. Angry, yes. And he manifested his anger in such a controlled, practiced way that, at times, it bordered on frightening.

But not today. Today her husband rested across from her, leaning against the side of the coach with his legs stretched across the seat, one booted foot dangling lazily over the edge. He opened an eye, raised a brow, and peered in her direction. "We have about ten minutes until we arrive. If you are so inclined, I could warm you up and help you forget your fears."

"Oh, you!" Lia tossed her lap blanket over his face. "How am I ever going to convince your family that we met and fell instantly in love when you frustrate me to perdition?"

Ren lowered the material, and in a single swift movement, reached across and pulled her onto his lap. With one finger he turned her face toward his.

She did not want to look at his grinning countenance, so she squeezed her eyes shut, but that could not prevent her from hearing his laughter. Lia tried to pull away from him, but he held her tight. "You're laughing at me," she pouted.

"With you, not at you." Ren stroked her back. "Relax, sweetheart. There's nothing to worry about. My family is now your family. My home is now yours. The girls will adore you, and so will my grandmother."

He continued his soothing gesture, as he began to describe his family. "Sarah, my youngest sister is six years old, and in dire need of someone to act as mother to her. She has the adventurous spirit of a boy three times her age, and it is rather disconcerting that she fears not a thing. I'm afraid one day I'll wake to learn she has sailed to China, or South America. She will definitely need taming and instruction. Her nurse does what she can, the poor dear, but she is aged herself, for Mildred was my nurse all those years ago. I had planned to hire a governess for Sarah before her seventh birthday, but I will let you make that decision now.

“My other sister, Elise, has always had many friends with four legs, but not many who wear skirts.” Here her husband gave a worried sigh. “She and I shared the same mother, who died shortly after her birth. Father mourned for several years, and eventually remarried, I think so Elise could grow up with a woman in the home, though it was obvious to all that he grew to love Amelia. Since their deaths, Elise has been hiding in the barns, working with the horses.”

“I’m not sure if you do things as we do, but has she been presented at court yet?” Lia asked.

“No. She’ll be seventeen this summer, and were planning her debut for next spring. But,” he paused, thinking about the situation with his sister, “I don’t think she’s keen on coming out at all. She doesn’t act as other girls do. She never did get excited by the glamor of dresses and jewels. In fact, she would rather have a new pair of riding boots, or comfortable breeches.”

Lia stared at him, surprised that he allowed his sister such freedoms.

“Father and Amelia’s deaths affected her deeply. She began to spend more and more time out in the barn with the horses. She’s forever talking about them, training and riding them. To see what she can do with an unruly horse is rather amazing, if I say so myself. She turns a wild, untamed creature into a puppy that follows her around waiting for instruction.

“She should be preparing for her come-out next spring, and you’d think she would be excited about all the parties, dresses, and young men. Instead, I see her going through the motions. The passion and vitality she had are gone. Sometimes I think she is just a ghost of her former self.”

“How long ago did your father and stepmother die?” Lia asked.

“Two and a half years,” Ren replied. “It was then that grandmother, my mother’s mother—who is Angus’ mother as well—came to live with us. She is a widow and felt her granddaughters needed her. Sarah was but a babe, and understood nothing. Elise, though, took the news hard. On the surface she has recovered, but grandmother and I both agree she’s still hurting inside.”

“It can be rather difficult to accept the fact that your parents will never return,” Lia said. “One day they’re here and full of life. The next they’re...,” she shrugged her shoulders, “gone.”

Ren urged her close, and held her tight. “I forget, darling. You know what she’s feeling, don’t you? Only for you and your brother, the pain is more recent.” Lia fought her tears, and nodded into his lapel. “You and Elise have a great deal in common. Perhaps you can become friends.”

Lia noticed the coach slowing down and rounding a curve. Her

husband shifted in his seat, still holding her close. "Here we are," Ren said, as the vehicle pulled to a stop. He assisted her with her cloak, raising her hood over her head. Then catching her off guard, he leaned over and covered her mouth with his, kissing her senseless, making her forget her nervousness.

She never heard the door open, but felt a sudden burst of cold, damp air enter the coach as Lia disengaged from his hold. A part of her was embarrassed at being caught in a passionate embrace, even if it was with her own husband. The liveried footman dropped the steps, and Ren descended first, offering Lia his hand. He lifted her out of the enclosed vehicle and set her carefully on the ground. She held her hood down to keep the rain from her face as she recovered her footing. She peeked out from under her hood, and got her first glimpse at the impressive structure before her.

In her wildest imagining, she hadn't expected this. Even on the cold and wet spring day, Haldenwood was clearly more grand than any home she could have conjured. At least one hundred yards across and sixty feet high, the three-story center building had a stone facade with decorative cornices above the many windows. Below each window of crown glass were carved lintels. Connected to each side of the main building were brick-covered additions, newer in design, and looked to have been built late in the last century.

The light rain was nourishing the parterre gardens in front of the home. The scent of freshly-turned soil filled the air as the intricately planned and tended beds appeared in various stages of blooming. In the middle of the drive, a circular, multi-leveled garden was filled with tulips, daffodils, and rhododendrons in flower. Gray-green spikes of lavender waited for warmer weather to burst into bloom. All this surrounded at ten foot tall statue of Jupiter, weathered from a hundred years in his guardian spot, holding a hand out to the drive.

Caught admiring her new surroundings, Lia felt heat rise to her cheeks, even as she shivered from the cold. She wasn't given much time to compose herself, because soon Ren turned her toward the front of the house where the servants began to line up on the steps in the rain, Ghita at the end, nearest to her. "How did she get here before us?"

"Didn't you notice? At the last stop, I sent the other coaches on ahead."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've been too worried over whether or not your grandmother will like me, that I never noticed we were completely alone."

"Never completely, I assure you."

Ghita stood next to a middle-aged woman who, by her dress, appeared to be the housekeeper. Next to them stood a dour-faced

gentleman. Many other servants, from the lowest ranking to the highest, must have known of their arrival, for dozens of them jockeyed for position on the steps in the drizzly rain as she and Ren neared. Just then she realized how wealthy her husband must be to have so many servants in his employ and a home so magnificent.

Ren steadied her, and led her forward, alongside him. "I bring you my wife, the Duchess of Caversham." Ren's voice was clear and proud. "I bid you welcome her to our home, and protect her as you have every other Halden since the invasion." To her he said, "Come let us go in out of the rain. You're shivering and I do not want you catching a cold."

What she presumed were the butler and housekeeper came forward and Ren said to them, "Milton, Mrs. Davies, we can make introductions to the staff when we take my wife on the tour. Right now, I'd like to get her warm, and the staff out of the rain."

The two nodded and they moved into the entryway where they were divested of their damp outerwear. "The family is waiting in the drawing room, Your Grace, in front of a roaring fire," said the butler.

"I shall see to some fresh hot tea and biscuits," said the housekeeper as she bustled off down the hall.

"Come, wife." Ren led her toward the entrance of the drawing room. "We have the family yet to meet."

She knew she was gawking, but she couldn't help herself. Lia was immediately struck by the opulence and warmth of the entryway, even though the day was gray and dreary. The walls were papered in a leaf pattern of mauve and green on a pale yellow backdrop. Carved wooden moldings crowned the doorways and were stained to match the handrail of the grand staircase. Overhead, a multi-tiered crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling.

Around her, every vase, large and small, held freshly cut blooms—their mixed scents wafting upward, filling the room. It reminded her of Caversham House. Someone in the household, Lia thought, was a dedicated horticulturist. A footman opened the door to the drawing room and she was immediately enveloped in the cozy warmth of the room, and it felt wonderful.

"Lia! Lia!" Her brother ran to her, bringing her out of her reverent awe. Reaching out for him, she held him tight, placing a kiss on his head.

He looked up, his dark brown eyes sparkling, an impish smile on his face. "Our coach went faster than yours. We've been here for hours. What took you so long?"

"Just because you can go faster doesn't mean you should," her husband replied. Ren embraced her, adding, "It was safer for your sister that we take a slower pace." That seemed to satisfy her brother.

Her husband led her to a petite silver-haired lady wearing a red silk turban and a gray bombazine dress with white trim. Her hazel eyes held an amused expression, and she smiled warmly. Ren stepped forward, bowed, and gave the woman a kiss on each cheek. Taking the elderly woman's hand, he said, "Grandmother, I would like for you to meet my wife, Lia. Lia, this is Lady Beatrice Sewell, my mother's mother."

Her new grandmother-in-law took both of Lia's hands and placed a kiss on each, then kissed her cheeks. Lia studied the other woman's hands, and knew then who so lovingly tended the gardens.

"The flowers are breathtaking, ma'am. You need not have troubled yourself on my behalf."

"There's not much else for an old woman to do around here," Lady Sewell replied. "I have discovered I enjoy working in the dirt and watching things grow." The older woman leaned forward to hug Lia, and whispered, "Besides, it keeps me out of trouble, and terrifies the gardeners," she added with a mischievous smile.

Ren led her to the next person in line. Lia considered herself tall, but the older of her husband's sisters stood several inches taller. A willowy brunette, whose long straight hair hung down her back, her light brown eyes were flecked with gold and held no emotion. Her smooth, creamy complexion had a healthy glow kissing her cheeks from being out of doors. With her delicately arched brows and symmetrical features, she was truly beautiful. *If only she would smile*, Lia thought.

Her husband hugged the girl, dropping a kiss on her cheek. "This is my sister, Elise." He turned to Lia, "And this is my wife, Lia. It is my wish that you two become friends, Elise. You have a great deal in common."

Elise nodded and curtsied low. "Welcome to your new home, Your Grace," the young woman said, still with no trace of a smile.

Evidently, Lia was the only one who heard the tinge of sarcasm in her new sister-in-law's voice because no one reacted. Still, she understood the girl, having gone through some difficulties herself recently. Lia knew, to adjust to changes as big as this, it took time. She hoped the attitude she saw in her new sister-in-law now didn't foreshadow a difficult time ahead for the two of them. "Please, call me Lia."

The girl nodded, turning her head away to inspect some imagined thing on her skirt.

Next to Elise, cross-legged on the floor, sat an impish golden-haired child with a riot of curls cascading over her shoulders to graze the floor. With her head in her hands, she appeared bored, waiting for the grown-ups to acknowledge her presence.

“Well, well, what have we here?” her husband said. He lifted the child high, forcing squeals and laughter from her. “You haven’t grown a bit since I’ve been away. How on earth do you plan to map the American continents if you don’t grow first?”

He set the child on her feet and she straightened proudly. “I’ll grow, Mildred says I have to be pa-sent.” Her sapphire blue eyes looked up to her brother with pride. “She says I must also eat all my vegetables. They don’t always taste very good, but I eat them anyway.”

“That’s a good girl, then.” Ren led the girl forward, and took Lia’s hand in his other. “Sarah, I would like to introduce you to my wife, Lia. Lia, this is my youngest sister, Sarah.”

“Elise says you’re going to have a baby. Is that true?”

Lia choked, caught off guard with the little girl’s direct question. She looked to Ren for some guidance on how to manage this line of questioning. He shrugged, then nodded, and she replied, “I believe so, yes. We are. Your brother and I, that is,” she corrected.

“Oh, good, then I will have a little brother or sister. Can I name the baby? I’m very good at naming all the baby animals when they are born.”

“Ah..., Your Grace,” she looked to her husband, needing his assistance.

He stepped in to rescue her. “No, sweetness,” Ren replied, “The new baby will be your niece or nephew, not your brother or sister. I am your brother and *Elise* is your sister. My wife, is.... I can’t believe I’m doing this,” her husband mumbled. Staring at his sister’s upturned, inquisitive face, Lia knew he was as uncomfortable as she with forming an answer for the child. “Lia is your sister-in-law.”

“What’s an in-law?”

“Through our marriage, my wife becomes your sister in the eyes of the law.”

The child looked satisfied with that answer, temporarily. She looked back to her big brother, and pointed at Luchino. “Then, who is *he*?” she asked.

“That’s Lucky, he is my wife’s brother, which makes him my brother-in-law.”

“Is he my in-law, too? You’re not married to him,” the observant child stated.

What followed next was an explanation that wound up so convoluted that her husband gave up attempting to finish. “They’re your new sister and brother, and leave it at that,” he said in frustration.

A smiling Lady Sewell stepped forward. “I’m sure your wife must be tired from the journey. I will show her to her rooms.”

Elise came forward, saying, "I'll do it grandmother. This way you do not have to take the stairs up until time to dress for dinner."

"Thank you." Ren smiled down at Lia. "Why don't you rest a while? I'm sure I have some estate business waiting for my attention. I will see you before dinner." He placed a chaste kiss on her cheek before she left. As she followed her new sister-in-law up the stairs, Lia heard him tell Sarah to show Luchino around. Her brother's voice drifted off as she climbed higher, but she could tell he didn't seem too excited to have a girl showing him the way.

"It was kind of you to show me to my rooms, Lady Elise," Lia said.

"Grandmother has a difficult time climbing the stairs, Your Grace," her new sister-in-law said. "I was coming up anyway, since I'm going back to the barn and must change into my breeches."

She said it so casually, as though it was normal for a young woman to wear men's breeches. Or perhaps the younger girl wanted Lia to be shocked by her actions and attire. Well, if she thought to frighten her into remaining at arm's length, the girl was in for a surprise. Lia never backed down from a challenge.

Lia wondered at the causes of her new sister-in-law's aloofness. She had to think of a plan. Maybe if she took an interest in Elise's hobby with the horses it might help to bring down the girl's defenses.

Midway down the long hallway, Elise stopped in front of a door. "These are your rooms," she said flatly. "I hope you find them to your liking." With that, her new sister-in-law turned, and walked away, leaving Lia to wonder at the girl's attitude. Especially as she'd volunteered to show her up.

"Thank you," she said to Elise's back, as a footman appeared from nowhere and opened the door to her room. Crossing the threshold she decided her sister-in-law needed time to adjust to her presence, but in a non-threatening way. She would suggest outings to the village perhaps, when the weather warmed, and after Ren's cousin was captured. Maybe Elise could show her the shops and introduce her to the shopkeepers.

Ghita greeted her, arms outstretched, ready to help her undress. "I ordered a bath the minute you arrived. My lady, wait until you see! You and His Grace have your own bathing chamber. The tub is big enough to swim in."

Lia chuckled softly, and lowered her frame into a plush chair near the hearth. "I doubt that, but I am glad you had the forethought to order up the water. I am tired, and wish to bathe this layer of grime from me."

The maid unlaced Lia's boots. "I also asked that a tray be sent up for you."

"I'll eat later," Lia took in her new surroundings. This home was even more grand and palatial than her husband's London home. In her room, not a thing seemed out of place or mussed. Not a speck of dust graced a table top or vase, and the mirrors and windows shone with a near blinding glow.

The floral patterned Aubusson carpet in this room was plush and inviting to the bare feet. Lia dug her toes in the deep pile, relishing the freedom of having her shoes removed.

"Ghita, help me undress," she said. "I need that bath, and afterward a short nap, if I am to make it through the rest of this day."

With her maid's assistance, Lia had to step down into the largest bathing vessel she'd ever seen. The sunken tiled bath was deep enough for the water to come to her chin if filled, and could easily seat two. In the center was a cover, which she presumed was over the drain. She marveled at the innovation, and wondered what was underneath this room, and where the water went after they were done.

Once settled, the warm water came nearly to her shoulders. The size, she assumed, was to accommodate her husband's massive frame. He might be able to relax in something this big, but she could not. Bathing quickly, she soon asked for Ghita's help to get out of the monstrosity.

"I thought you might like to soak for a while," Ghita said in their native Italian. "It looks so inviting."

"I'm rather tired and would like a nap," Lia said.

A large fire blazing in a hearth against one wall kept the room warmed. Ghita rubbed her dry and slipped a chemise over her head and placed her slippers within easy reach. Wrapped in her dressing gown, Lia walked into her room, and upon seeing the plush and inviting canopy bed, suddenly felt more tired.

"I think I'll take that nap now, Ghita. Wake me in time to dress for dinner."

As she lay on the deep, soft bed, Lia contemplated her new sister-in-law's attitude. She hoped to break through Elise's hardened exterior. She held the young lady no ill will, and vowed to prove this to her, wanting only her friendship.

The same with the younger girl, Sarah. Lia would have to proceed patiently. A relationship with Ren's sisters could not be rushed. She would have to let them approach her, and find out what kind of relationship they wished with her. If there was one thing she learned when she and her brother were forced to move in with their aunt and uncle, it was that relationships with new relatives take work. Because of the bond you must be amiable with each other—but only if there is caring will the relationship grow into a loving and trusting one. And love came with time.

If at all.

Ghita placed the final pin in Lia's upswept coif, and coiled the shorter tendrils into corkscrews around her face. Lia turned and looked into the full-length mirror. The woman looking back at her was far different than the one who was abducted four months earlier, and vastly different from the girl whose parents died almost a year ago.

She thought about them, and how she'd always wanted to have a love like theirs. Their love story was no exaggeration. They'd met at the University, where both worked translating ancient philosophical texts. They loved each other so much they died together.

Lia fought the tears as she recalled the day. They had been working in separate rooms, when a fire broke out, quickly consuming the building. From the stories told by witnesses, her father had been trapped behind a wall of flames and her mother ran to rescue him, only to be trapped herself. They never made it out. When their bodies were recovered from the rubble, they were holding each other.

Lia had wanted a love that grand. She even believed she might find it one day—until her aunt and uncle had come to claim them. Now she was married and making the best of the situation—certainly not an unpleasant one—and about to have a child of her own. She prayed daily that the relationship between she and Ren might blossom. She felt some of the elements were there—the care, affection, and passion, so they were starting off on a better foot than most. But she wanted more, and she was hoping that the love she sought might come with time.

She sighed and turned to face her maid. "I swear, this hair style will give me a headache before the evening is over." Tugging at the low neckline of the gown. Lia tried to suck in her belly.

"You aren't showing yet, my lady. Why do you worry about your size?"

"I just feel so fat," she replied.

"You look beautiful, my lady. His Grace will agree with me, I know it."

"What will he do when nothing I own fits any longer?"

"He will understand that it's his babe that grows, then call the modiste."

She chuckled. "I hope you're right," she said as she left the room in search of her husband. As she descended the wide, curving marble steps, she noticed the portraits hanging on the wall. Every male ancestor her husband had was depicted in his portrait finery, with a few wearing the robes of their office. But one painting stood out from all the rest, that of a gentleman Lia assumed was Ren's father.

Except for the receding hairline and gray hair, it could easily have

been Ren. The same clear, silver eyes under dark, arched brows stared back at her, and the same high cheekbones with a sliver of a dimple under each. The man in the painting had a slightly fuller mouth than Ren, but even the dimples were exactly the same. She was looking at her husband's father and seeing the future. Would her son one day look as regal and handsome?

Suddenly, a warm current flowed through her and she became aware of another presence behind her. Turning, she smiled as she saw her husband standing near the base of the stairs. His molten-metallic gaze met hers, and he returned her smile.

He cut a fine figure in his black breeches and waistcoat, with his snowy cravat knotted above the stiff collar. His black hair had been trimmed, and he appeared to have been freshly shaved.

Lia felt his stare as it caressed her form. She found herself rooted to the step, unable to move, as Ren came toward her, reaching for her arm. Though his proud bearing and noble manners appealed to her, his handsome looks made him physically desirable from the first moment she saw him. But more than that, this man's mere presence aroused her. When he touched her, small tremors coursed through her body. Her knees buckled as his lips brushed a kiss on her bare neck. Detecting her weakness, her husband wrapped his arm around her waist, lifting her off the last steps to set her on the floor.

"Come, wife," he whispered. "The family awaits."

A flock of butterflies roused and fluttered in her belly, and she trembled slightly as he led her into the drawing room, where his grandmother, sisters, and Lucky waited. He leaned over and whispered an encouragement, and she nodded though she didn't hear what he said. The only thought going through her head was that she wanted them to like her. It would give any relationship between them solid roots if they could get along.

A footman came forward bearing a tray with two wine glasses, her husband took one and handed the other to her. She saw that his grandmother and Elise already held glasses, and the children held small cups.

After greeting everyone, Lady Sewell rang the silver bell from the serving tray, gaining everyone's attention. "I would like to say something," the elder woman said. "I have waited for this day for a very long time. My grandson has found a treasure of a wife, in a foreign land, and did the smart thing by marrying her and bringing her home. Remember always how much you love each other this day." Facing her she said, "May your lives be filled with happiness and children." Then Lady Sewell turned to Ren, and continued. "May the seeds ye sow be as beautiful as your bride, as loving as my daughter, your mother, and as honorable as your father."

When Ren's grandmother lifted her glass, everyone followed suit, including Lia. She thanked her new grandmother, and took a sip from her glass. Elise and Lady Sewell congratulated them, on their marriage and the upcoming babe.

The door opened and the butler cleared his throat to catch their attention. He announced that dinner was ready to be served in the dining hall. Her husband came and raised his forearm to lead her into dinner.

All through their meal her new grandmother led the conversation, questioning them on where and how they met, and as they had rehearsed, each question was skillfully answered. Thankfully, Ren had the foresight to instruct Luchino on the necessity of masking a few of the facts of their meeting and journey. He stressed his grandmother's weakened constitution, and his sisters' delicate sensibilities as the reason for doing so. She was so proud of her brother, because at eight years of age, he'd understood the importance of doing this for them, and performed his role with ease.

Lia attempted to taste each dish that was set before her. If she could, she took one spoon or fork full, then pushed the rest of the food around on her plate, hoping no one noticed. Some dishes she was afraid to try because the smell of them was unsettling to her stomach. It went on like this for over an hour.

After dessert, Sarah's nurse came and took the two children away. Lia saw her husband wink at her brother, thanking him for his performance, and her brother winked back. Ren turned his head to hide his smile.

The adults moved into the front parlor which was also used as a music room. Elise sat at the pianoforte and began to play a piece by Bach. She and Lady Sewell sat on a high-backed sofa, and her new grandmother began to tell Lia the story of their family, and how the shipping company came to be so important. "My first husband, Ren's grandfather, was insistent that no son or grandson inherit shares of his company unless they knew the business from the bottom up. His own grandfather, who'd founded Aberdeen Trading, had done the same with him when he was a lad, and said that was how the company managed to never lose money. It was how he raised his son, Angus, and how it's been ever since. Several times a year my grandson came north to Scotland and sailed with his uncle and his two cousins."

"And your husband, did he go with them?" Lia asked.

Lady Sewell shook her silk-turbaned head. "Oh, no. My Robbie died when Angus was about fifteen. He caught a fever in the Indies on one of his many voyages. He left me a wealthy widow, and our son the owner of his shipping company, though everything was held in trust until they reached his majority. The guardian of that trust

became my second husband, Lord Sewell. He was a good man, who knew how to turn a coin even if he couldn't stomach the sea. He loved my children as his own, and he knew before we wed that I could have no others."

"You were fortunate in that," Lia said.

Lady Sewell agreed, then began to regale Lia with tales of Ren's childhood, and when Lia laughed at something the older woman said, Elise stopped playing. "Do you sing or play, Your Grace? You're sure to be better at it than I. Perhaps you would like to play for us?" she asked.

Lia turned to her sister-in-law. She shook her head. "I'm afraid I cannot do either."

The other girl's eyebrow rose, in a manner similar to her brother's. "Oh, then, do you ride?"

"No. I never learned."

"Would you like to learn?" Elise asked. "I could teach you, you know."

"I thank you for the invitation." Her hand absently slid down to her lower belly and held it there. "But, I cannot risk it right now."

She didn't want to use the babe as an excuse, but it truly was the reason she would not be getting on a horse anytime soon. When she politely declined the offer Lia saw a shutter close in Elise's eyes, as though she was keeping Lia intentionally on the other side, proving that the animosity she felt when she met her new sister-in-law wasn't her imagination. Sitting on the piano bench, with her hands folded on her lap, and a sweetly innocent smile on her angelic face, Lady Elise appeared the embodiment of graciousness itself as she extended the invitation.

"When you are able," her sister-in-law replied with a reserved smile, "I shall teach you."

Ren stood and came to her side, putting an arm around her. He appeared relaxed as he and his sister discussed the horses she'd purchased as the foundation for her new project. After a few minutes she felt a tap on her shoulder and looked up. She saw a familiar look in the silvery depths of his eyes. One she had become very familiar with in their time together. Desire. It was the one constant in this man, her husband.

When she stood, she laid her head on Ren's chest. The other occupants of the room might have thought she was tired from her travels when, in reality, she inhaled his scent.

"I believe my wife and I shall retire," Ren announced. "She's not been sleeping well, and tomorrow will be a long day for me. I have quite a bit to catch up on around here."

Standing next to her, he lifted his wife's chin, and placed a chaste

kiss on her forehead. "Are you ready, darling?"

The words of affection came so easily from his lips and she wanted to believe he meant them because she had fallen in love with him. And Lia found herself wanting Ren to love her in return.

She nodded, and they said their good nights. Ren led her from the room, and into the hallway. Once out of the sight of the rest of the family, he hugged her close and nuzzled her neck. "I'm not in the least tired," he whispered. "Are you?"

Lia couldn't think clearly as his hands roved down her back, to cup her bottom. He pulled her closer, she met his steady gaze. She smiled, arched a brow, then shook her head in return.

As they made their way up the wide, curved staircase, neither saw the grin on the face of the old woman standing in the doorway of the front parlor.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ren opened the door to his room and led Lia in. Without releasing his hold on her hand, he dismissed his valet. He brought her into his arms again and kissed her. God help him, he wanted her, with such a fierce hunger it frightened him. He'd never felt this before. When he'd discovered Margaret's infidelity with Thomas, the pain he felt was from the betrayal of a man thought of as a friend. It had little to do with the betrayal of the woman he was about to marry. Maybe that was because he didn't love Margaret.

Did he love Lia? Was that the difference? He wasn't sure yet, but he'd never felt so possessive, never wanted any woman the way he wanted her. He felt an obsessive desire to keep her safe and always at his side.

The need to become a part of her, and to have her become a part of him, was too intense for thought. It was an almost combustible, all-consuming desire. Her sweetness and uninhibited responses to his touch fanned a flame in his soul. The one that tied their lives together, giving them a child.

He parted her lips and delved into her recess, tasting her sweetness. His hands stroked the silky-soft skin of her nape, working his fingers toward the pins holding her hair upon her head. Ever so deftly he removed each one, dropping them to the floor. He twined his fingers through the mass of dark curls cascading down her back. Never releasing her lips, he backed her toward the chairs in front of the hearth, blazing with a fire to ward off the chill of the night.

He broke away from her, and lowered his frame into a seat, kicking off his shoes. He pulled her between his thighs. Lifting one of her legs, he removed her slipper, dropping it to the floor and placed her foot on the seat. With trembling hands he untied the ribbon holding her stocking. Rolling it down slowly, he allowed his hands to caress the curve of her calf and delicate skin of her ankle before removing the thin material and letting it pool on top of the shoe. He did the same with the stocking on the other leg, then stood and began working on the row of tiny buttons on the back of her gown.

Ren's body ached to be free of his clothing, but this was for her. His release would come later. Finally, he had the last fastening undone. He lifted the dress over her head, leaving his wife standing in her underclothes. His fingers worked the laces of the corset, then the petticoats, and with much aggravation he finally removed them from her body. It left her standing in her fine chemise, her woman's curves silhouetted against the glow of the fire behind her.

Lia untied his cravat and it fell silently to the floor when he stood, and then removed his waistcoat and shirt. His eyes never left hers. A tremor rocked him when she touched his skin. In all his life, he couldn't remember having this deep a reaction to any woman. No one had ever been so willing, so sincere in her affections with him. His mistresses never denied him, but they expected payment for their performance.

His wife didn't shy away from touching him, she didn't object to kissing his body, or loving him intimately. Ren smiled when he remembered how Lia told him that he'd been cheated when he revealed his mistresses had refused that certain act.

His hands returned to his wife, kneading her shoulders. He lowered his head to her neck, inhaling her unique scent of fresh-cut roses and musk, and he tasted of her warm flesh. Slowly, his lips traced a feather-light path from behind her ear to the curve of her neck, where he brought his mouth down and began to nibble. Her breaths and moans spurred him onward, and he pushed aside the material to devour more of her, to feel her flesh touching his.

He lifted the remaining garment over her head, and it fell to the floor in a whisper of cascading fabric. Ren lifted her into his arms and carried her to his bed. He set her down in the middle of the deep, soft mattress before divesting himself of his breeches. He lowered himself next to her and propped himself upon his elbow.

"Lia, look at me." His own voice was so strained he didn't even recognize it.

She obeyed, looking up at him with such love and trust. He suddenly felt at a loss for words. He wanted to tell her he couldn't live without her, that he needed her in more ways than just as a vessel for his release and cradle for his heirs. But didn't know how.

So he showed her. With his body.

Ren touched her. With his hands and lips he worshiped her, this woman, the cradle of his child, his wife. He caressed the valley below her navel, where his son or daughter grew. Leaning into her, he kissed her lips again, then down to kiss her belly.

Lia stirred and moaned, her hands finding their way into his hair. Ren became emboldened and allowed his lips to rove lower. Stopping at her downy curls, he inhaled her musk, and parted her, his fingers delving into her. She was moist, ready for him. But he wanted this to last forever, so he slowed his hand. Moving up her body, he took her lips again. His tongue parted her mouth and explored her, memorizing every sharp edge, every smooth surface. She moaned and arched her body into his, and he chuckled softly.

"Soon, love," he murmured. "Soon. I want you as well."

Taking her hand, he laid it over his heart, and stared into those

magnificent emerald eyes. "Can you feel what you do to me? Feel me."

He then moved her hand down to cover his hardness. "This is what you do to me, Lia. I wanted to come to you so badly last week, but I was afraid."

"You only had to knock, husband," she whispered. "I would not have refused you."

"I know that now, though I still fear...." His voice sounded gravelly, even to his own ears.

"You will not hurt me, or the babe," she stated. "Get that idea out of your head."

Ren kissed her again, his hands roving over her form. He moved lower, parting her and loving her with his tongue on her most sensitive spot until she cried out with her first release. He pulled himself up and entered her slowly, filling her completely before moving.

If ever he were to lose his sight, it wouldn't be the sunrise, sunset, or change of seasons he would miss. It would be the look on his wife's face at that moment, with a tear perched on her dark lashes and her emerald eyes so full of passion. This woman was his soul. As no other ever was.

As no other ever would be.

It wasn't long before he needed to pick up the pace in order to give them their completion. And they found it minutes later, when he offered his soul to her.

Later, as she lay sleeping in his arms, he watched her deep, even breathing, and wondered how he was going to tell her he'd fallen in love with her.

Two months later her husband walked into the drawing room as she and his grandmother visited with the wife and mother-in-law of the local parson. He asked to speak with her privately, and Lia excused herself, and went with him into the library. After the door shut behind them he took her up in his arms and kissed her.

She pushed him away, and began to smooth the wrinkles from her skirt. "Stop. You'll muss my hair and clothing, and I must return to spare your grandmother Mrs. Elliot's entire laundry list of physical ailments. She's only just begun, and is explaining how her gouty foot has been."

He smiled, but the sentiment didn't quite reach his eyes. "I must go to Town on business," her husband said. "I may be gone a week or two, maybe even three. Depending."

When he said no more, Lia suspected something might be wrong. "Has your cousin been found?"

He shrugged. "We think he's dead," Ren said. "According to Michael, it appears to be him, the identification on the body says it's him. I want to be certain before my aunt in Cornwall is notified. I would spare her undue pain if I could. So I must hurry."

She nodded.

"This does not mean you can leave the grounds yet. I know you wish to go into the village to shop, but wait for my return. Until I know for certain he's gone, I will take no chances with you or our child."

"Fine. I'll wait," she said. Remembering something, she added, "Mrs. Steen said in the letter I received yesterday that the rest of my new clothing arrived from the modiste. Could you bring them with you when you return?"

He nodded, and when she turned to go back to join the other women, her husband held her from behind, placing his hands over her growing belly. "Hopefully the new dresses will have enough room for my child to grow."

"That's why I had her make new ones. I'm afraid I'm getting as big as a cow."

He held her closer. "You are not as big as a cow. This is my child growing in here," he said as he stroked her belly, "and he needs more room to move. At least that's how it felt last night as he stretched and turned." He turned her in his arms and planted a kiss on her cheek. "You are beautiful, wife. Never forget that."

"I'm glad you think so, because it's your fault I'm getting big."

Elise traveled to London to meet him for the funeral of their cousin, Lord Thomas Whitby. The rest of the family remained behind at Haldenwood.

Both he and Michael identified the body as that of his cousin. Ren then sent a letter to his aunt in Cornwall. Within days Thomas' body was in the ground and Ren began to feel a great weight lift off his back. It was a freedom he had not felt since before the death of his father and stepmother. There was a small measure of happiness mixed with that relief, and he felt as though the future was finally looking up for their family.

Upon his return to Haldenwood, Cartland's added security detail was allowed to return to Town, as Ren now felt confident enough to travel for work again, leaving his home with just their staff to protect the family.

The warmth of summer gave way to an early fall, and Lia felt her body stretch to tremendous proportions. Dr. Prescott arrived for a short stay each month, primarily to visit with Lia and Lady Sewell, but

also to do some shooting with her husband. The physician was pleased by her continued good health, which also pleased her husband of course. And, at each visit Ren made certain that Prescott left with a basket of cook's fruit tarts.

Approaching her seventh month, Lia was now restricted to the house and the formal gardens which were closest to the home. Prescott explained to her his reasons for wishing this, which she understood, even though she disagreed. She'd already spent most of the past five months close to home or indoors and unable to travel. Her husband agreed with the doctor, saying he wanted to make sure his wife and unborn child were safe.

So she filled her days by teaching Luchino and Sarah reading and writing, geography and mathematics. Even little Sarah, now five years of age, was beginning to add and subtract. Lia did this by making learning fun for the children, creating games for them.

When she wasn't giving the children lessons, she was doing her needlework. Once the baby's gowns and napkins were completed, she began embroidering the Caversham coat of arms to be hung in the nursery.

Her sister-in-law spent a great deal of time, indeed most of every day, out of doors. Even when it rained, she worked on her project, spending time in the library making notes in ledgers, and creating charts for creating a new bloodline of horses. This was not normally something considered appropriate for a young, unmarried lady, but Ren seemed to think prohibiting her outright would only serve to have her do it behind his back. Her husband said he'd prefer Elise be supervised by himself or their head groom, rather than have her work at her project clandestinely. Because he felt her idea had merit, and he didn't want Elise getting hurt, he made sure she was always accompanied by qualified grooms who could assist.

Lia had hoped that as time passed Elise would warm to her, if not becoming a friend, at least not continuing with the indifference toward her. When in the company of her brother or grandmother, she was the epitome of kindness and propriety. But when left alone, she completely ignored Lia, a couple of times even walking away when Lia had asked a question of her, as though she wasn't even in the same room.

This was not something with which she wanted to burden her husband. Lia knew she had to give Elise time to become accustomed to the idea of having another woman in the house, one who by law and in the eyes of the church was now mistress of the younger woman's childhood home.

Perhaps the birth of her brother's child would be the catalyst to bring them together. Lia hoped so, for her sister-in-law's sake. She

realized after her own parents' sudden deaths that life was too short to waste time in enmity.

Her husband's grandmother, Lady Sewell, on the other hand, was a delightful conversationalist, once Lia became familiar with the woman's strange accent. Lady Sewell was also a fair chess opponent. The older woman taught her and Luchino to play whist, a game which she had a difficult time mastering, and backgammon, which Lia became proficient at during the course of one evening. Lady Sewell led her on walks through each of the gardens she'd restored.

"I had to have something to do when I got here you see, and the gardens had been neglected a bit. They were tended, but unchanged since my daughter's death. So I decided to do some sprucing up." She laughed heartily. "Much as Prescott thinks I'm about to cock up my toes, I showed him. You see, I'm a long way from meeting my maker, lass." The older woman hugged her. "I have a great-grandchild to meet."

Several weeks later, on a cold late-November afternoon, Lia set the embroidery hoop on the seat beside her. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back, then side to side, stretching her neck. Embroidery was such tedious work, but she wanted to finish this last crib blanket before the babe was born. She wriggled her fingers, hoping to get the feeling back. They had long ago become numb.

A footman entered her sitting room and stoked the fire, adding coal and coaxing it back to life. When the man left the room, Lia's head snapped up upon hearing her husband's voice ask after her whereabouts. She turned, smiling at Ren, who returned the greeting.

Leaning down he placed a chaste kiss on her cheek. "Good afternoon, wife. How are you feeling?"

"I feel miserably bloated, thank you. And yourself?"

"I am perfectly wonderful, thank you for asking, though I must leave for London immediately," he said. "My valet is packing for me as we speak."

He turned from her and made a display of warming his hands by the fire.

"Again?" she asked softly.

"Yes. It is only for a week, at most." Ren knelt before her on the settee. "Hopefully, after this, I won't have to make another trip to Town until after the babe is born." He rubbed Lia's enormous belly. "How is my son today?"

"Our *babe* is doing well, and is very active." She stared at her husband's handsome face, her eyes growing wide and a smile forming. Taking his hand, she placed it on the side of her belly, and held it there until he felt the movement. "I will be glad when this is over,"

she said.

He gave her a half-smile, then stood and went back to the hearth. "I'm sure you will, my sweet." He looked as though he wanted to say more, but didn't. Lia hefted her bulk up from the settee, and came to stand before him. She hadn't seen him so worried in months. In fact, she'd thought just the day before how she'd never seen him so relaxed as he had been these past weeks.

She placed her hand over his heart. "All is well here, you needn't worry about us." Then, she lifted his hand and set it onto her belly.

Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her close.

"Is there something upsetting you?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "What makes you think that?"

"You seem different. That's all." He turned away, unwilling to meet her gaze. What was this mood of his? When he entered the room he seemed happy enough. What had changed?

"I love you, Lia."

Now she understood. These were the words she had longed to hear, and now that she had, they didn't bring the instant enthusiastic joy she'd thought it would. Nor did it validate her being, or the emotion she'd been holding inside for the past five months. "I know you do," she said. He looked at her curiously. "I have known it for months now."

"How...?"

"You have shown me daily you love me," she leaned up and placed a chaste kiss on his lips. "And I have tried to return my love to you in the same manner, thinking when you are ready you will say the words, freeing me to finally tell you in return."

"I love you, my husband. I have for quite a while." She stroked his cheek with the back of her fingers. "But something still troubles you. I can see it. Please tell me?"

He shifted and kept his hold of her. "It is not, nor has it ever been, easy for me to put my feelings into words, but I felt I must tell you because as you get closer to delivering this babe I realized..." He trailed off, his fear evident. "I mean... Thomas is no longer a threat, but I could still..."

"Still what?" she prompted him.

"I could lose you," his voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. "My mother died giving birth to Elise, and I watched my father grieve deeply for her. I don't want to go through that."

"You will not. I shall be fine. Both Dr. Prescott and Grandmother say I have hips made for the task of birthing."

"Also, I didn't want you to think I didn't..." he cleared his throat again, "that I didn't love you. Because I do. I have. For quite some time now."

A tap at the door separated them, and Lia called for the person to enter. Her husband's valet cleared his throat as he set a large leather pouch on the table.

"The luggage is in the coach, and it awaits us in the drive, Your Grace," he turned and walked away, leaving the two of them alone.

Turning her chin up, he pressed a kiss on her forehead. "While I am away, you are not to leave the house. Is this understood?"

"Not even to the garden with Grandmother?"

"Not even that. It is getting much colder now, and there's the possibility you could slip on ice. Or catch a cold or worse. No. Stay indoors where it is warm and safe. Please. For me?"

It wasn't until she promised not to go outdoors, that he turned and left.

Ren resumed reviewing the shipping company's ledgers. The accounting from the last shipment from the Indies was turning out to be one of their most profitable. That should have pleased him. But he couldn't get his mind off the green-eyed beauty carrying his child that he'd left behind at Haldenwood. He loved her, and the realization scared the hell out of him. He'd never really loved a woman before. Not like this.

Oh, he loved his mother, grandmother, stepmother and sisters. He cared for and enjoyed the company of several female friends. At one time, he'd thought he cared for Margaret.

But this? This kind of love was something new to him. It was an all-consuming need. And it didn't come without its price—the constant worry for her well-being and happiness.

Then there was the matter of wanting to be with her all the time. A strange sensation pooled in the vicinity of his heart whenever she was near. It quickened his pulse and tightened his chest, constricting his breathing. Simply being in her presence, whether she played a game with the children, sat with his grandmother as they stitched needlework before the fire, or read in his office while he worked, made him feel content.

He loved her strong, calming presence, and wished he were back at home with her. After his two meetings tomorrow, he just may be able to leave London behind until after the babe's birth.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After dining with the children in the nursery, Lia sought out the company of her grandmother-in-law. She wandered down to the saloon, hoping to catch her in a game of whist or backgammon with Elise, or perhaps reading. Instead, she learned Lady Sewell had retired early, feeling a bit under the weather. She found Elise reading in the library and thought maybe she could use the opportunity to become better acquainted. God alone knew how much she wanted a friend.

During the months at Haldenwood, she'd learned she had to approach Elise carefully. When her husband was home, he was the buffer between them and her sister-in-law seemed genuinely nice, even friendly. But when Ren was not home, Elise was distant and took great pains to avoid her. So as not to appear obviously seeking her out, Lia went to the bookcase and spied a title of interest, which happened to be on the top shelf. She made a half-hearted attempt at reaching it and considered climbing the library stool, but didn't want to chance falling.

Breaking the tomb-like silence of the room, Lia said, "Excuse me, Elise, could I trouble you to get a book down for me?" Her sister-in-law gave her an irritated glance and stood. Lia put one hand to her low back, the other to her tightening belly. "I would fetch it myself if I were not afraid I'd lose my balance."

"If I get the book for you, will you leave? I can't concentrate with you mulling about." Elise's beautiful golden-flecked brown eyes blazed with impatience and animosity.

Elise could have slapped her and it would have hurt less. She didn't know where to begin to build a relationship with her husband's sister, even after living under the same roof for the past seven months. Now that the seasons were changing and the days were shorter, Elise was indoors more than out as the weather didn't always cooperate with her riding and training of her many horses.

"I'm sorry to have troubled you, Elise." Lia gave her a half-hearted smile and turned for the door. From out of nowhere, a fresh barrage of tears threatened to fall. She took a deep slow breath to suppress them, then turned to leave. "Perhaps I should turn in and leave you to your solitude."

From upon the stool, her sister-in-law turned to her and called out, "Which book was it you wanted?"

"I've changed my mind," her voice trembled as she said the words. "Goodnight, Elise."

Lia made for the door quickly so she wouldn't witness her upset

because Lia didn't want the girl thinking she hit her mark with her barbs. When she reached the steps, a footman followed closely behind "in case she should fall," as he'd often told her. She composed herself quickly, because Ghita was sure to notice if she was upset and be full of questions.

Lia found it cowardly that Elise only behaved this way when there were no witnesses. When in the company of the rest of the family, or even if a servant was present, she never said such things. Tomorrow, when she was less tired, she'd have to confront her sister-in-law and get to the bottom of what was troubling her.

Once in her room, Ghita dutifully helped her change into her dressing gown. Lia sat at her desk and began to plan Luchino's and Sarah's lessons for the morning. Her maid gathered Lia's stockings and chemise to be laundered, when she noticed Lia rubbing her belly. "The babe moving?" Ghita asked in their native tongue.

"No. The muscles tighten every so often. The doctor said I should expect this. He said it's my body getting ready for the birth."

"Shall I have the butler send for His Grace?"

"No. I have another month before the babe's due. Besides, in his last letter His Grace said he would be home soon."

Ghita left, and Lia began to cry again. "Oh, these unending tears," she said to the empty chamber. She wanted her husband. What was keeping him away so long this time?

The following evening Lia sat across from Ren's grandmother as she lay in her bed, not feeling well as the cold and damp weather settled in hard. Lia read to her from a book on horticulture and when Lia thought she slept, the older woman would surprise her by adding a comment or two concerning the methodology of growing certain types of plants. During one of her monologues on grafting and the creation of new subspecies, Lia's mind wandered. It had been almost two weeks since her husband left for London and she wondered what was keeping him. In his last letter, he said an emergency had come up in Cornwall with his aunt and it necessitated a visit. She prayed he made it safely and found things much improved when he got there, so that he might get home to her faster.

Lady Sewell opened her hazel eyes. "My dear, what's troubling you?"

"Nothing ma'am," Lia lied, unable to hold the other woman's piercing gaze. "I am well."

"Balderdash. You've read the same paragraph three times. Twice and I could understand you lost your place, but thrice?" The woman shook her gray head. "Something is not right, and I demand to know what it is."

Lia explained about Ren's unplanned trip to Cornwall, and tried to smile. "I miss him. The longer he's away, the more insecure about his sentiment I get." Lia stroked her belly. "I know it's the babe that's making me weepy, for I have never been given to tears in this way before."

"Aye, carrying a babe will do that," the old woman nodded reassuringly. "Don't worry, dear. If I know anything about my grandson, it's that he loves ye, and he'll be home soon."

"Hopefully before the babe makes his entrance," Lia said as she waddled to her own room across the hall.

Ren rode up to the modest, neat cottage outside Falmouth in which his aunt resided, her husband's family having moved her out of the main house when her second husband, Admiral Linley, died shortly before his own father's death. Now residing alone here with none but her two servants, the woman was slowly losing her hold on reality.

His emergency visit came after an urgent message arrived from her manservant and cook, a husband and wife who came highly recommended as caretakers. He needed to see to this situation himself, as it wasn't something he felt he could pass off on his man of business. Growing up, this aunt was a particular favorite of his, as she and Thomas lived at Haldenwood after her first husband killed himself upon returning from his commission. Several years later, she married Admiral Harold Linley, after his wife died leaving him with three daughters to raise and no relations to care for them while he was at sea. She married him, thinking a career military man would be a good influence on Thomas.

Linley wasn't often home, and when he was, he wasn't a kind man, according to the tales Thomas shared while they were at Eton. Ren imagined his Aunt Millicent took the brunt of his wrath when he was in port. The Admiral once told his father that he would never have married Millicent if he'd known she could not give him sons. This attitude bled through to the daughters. From all accounts, Linley put his three daughters on pedestals as, in his opinion, the girls could do no wrong. Now married, those women had no love for their stepmother even after her nearly twenty years of marriage to their father.

According to Millicent's servants, not one of her stepdaughters ever visited her, and they requested she not visit their father's tomb on the estate as he is laid to rest near their mother. In a recent correspondence with the husband of the eldest daughter, Ren was told that Mrs. Linley's family should make arrangements for her interment after her passing as the daughter's wished their stepmother not be

buried on the grounds of their family home, with their mother and father.

If ever there was a contemptible family to avoid, it was this one. Ren was certain that the animosity of her stepdaughters weighed heavily on his aunt. She likely felt alone and unwanted. Hers was a situation that could cause even the strongest of women to fall into melancholy. Depending on how this visit went, he would speak with his wife about either taking in Aunt Millicent, or bringing her to live closer to Haldenwood, perhaps set her up in the village where she was born.

Aunt Millicent's manservant, Mr. Fletcher, took the reins of his horse as he rode into the stable yard. A burly man, he was a good hand with the small number of livestock they had, and he kept the minimal grounds tidy. His wife, Mrs. Fletcher, cooked and cleaned for the three of them.

Ren hadn't spoken to his aunt since the funeral, though he'd corresponded with her once. In that letter, she didn't sound as separated from reality as the Fletchers made her sound in their recent note. Ren asked Fletcher about the situation before he went in to speak with her.

"Mrs. Linley has been crazed of late, Your Grace. Says the wildest things, she does."

"Such as?"

"She says her son is very much alive, an' she sees him at night when he comes to visit her. She says he tells her that he's coming for her one day soon and he's goin to take her to live in London with him."

When Ren felt he'd heard enough, he sought out his aunt. He ducked his head as he stepped down into the warm reception room, where his aunt sat in her rocking chair before the fire. Her hands were folded together in her lap, her eyes closed, as though in prayer.

If possible, she appeared much older than even five months ago when they buried Thomas. Her gray hair was almost white now and cut short. His aunt's once radiant skin and full cheeks were now ashen and sunken into the bony recesses of her face. Her clothes were clean, as was her home. Ren cleared his throat and she lifted her gray-green eyes to his and smiled.

"Your Grace, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" She called for Mrs. Fletcher, then rose and slowly made the three steps to stand before him.

Ren kissed her cheeks and said, "I came to wish you Happy Christmas, Aunt."

He led her back to her seat before the fire, and he took the chair opposite her. "I've also come to see how you fare. To ask if you are

happy here, and see if there is anything I can do for you.”

“No, no. I am well. Except that I cannot read or do my cross-stitching any longer because the eyes do not see well enough.” She lowered her gaze, and said sheepishly, “It is also why I have not replied to your last letter.”

Ren thought she looked well, though seemed a little nervous. “Think nothing of it, Aunt. That is why I am here to check on your welfare.”

She brightened at that. “You have always had a caring heart, Your Grace, even as a child. And I hear that you are now to have child of your own soon. How wonderful for you.”

“Yes. My wife and I are very pleased by the addition to the family.” Ren wanted to ask her how she learned of Lia’s condition, but she soon started in on the delusional talk.

“Yes, Thomas told me on one of his earlier visits that you’d married and were expecting an heir. He’s also married, you know, and his wife is expecting a child as well.” She clapped her hands happily and said, “What fun it will be next Christmas when we have both babes under the same roof. You will come to visit next year too, won’t you?”

Ren nodded, playing along with her imagination so as not to upset her. Mrs. Fletcher brought in the tea cart, and poured.

“Thank you, Edna,” his aunt said. Once the housekeeper left the room, she continued, “Of course Thomas is planning to remove us from Cornwall to London, as it’s more civilized and there are the various entertainments a young couple such as he and his wife enjoy. He says I will live with them and watch my grandchildren grow.” She passed him a dessert plate with little cookies, and he took one and set it aside. “Thomas has turned his life around, Your Grace, he has seen the error of his youthful indiscretions and is now in the black, having married an heiress.”

When he first arrived she appeared normal, and he was hard pressed to conclude his aunt was losing her mind. But when she began to speak of her dead son as though he still lived, Ren knew she skated the edge of sanity.

“Where is Thomas these days?” he asked. “I haven’t seen him in months.”

“He’s living with his wife’s family in Yorkshire, though they are planning a move soon.” His aunt shook her head, the only sign of confusion he’d seen thus far. “To Town,” his aunt said uncertainly, “Yes, to Town. That’s what he said.”

Ren continued his interview in the least aggressive way he knew. He appeared genuinely interested, as he continued. “He must have married whilst I was out of the country. Whom did he marry? Anyone

I know?"

"Your Grace, your memory is as troubled as mine if you do not recall," his aunt stated. "Why he married Lord Skeffington's eldest, Lady Margaret." She appeared a little more confused here, but kept on with her tale. "Thomas said you weren't at all pleased when they came to you and told you of their love. But he said you... understood and gave your blessing."

Ren played the part of the adle-brained one to ease his aunt's growing upset. "I remember now, Aunt! That's right. He's very right! I did forget." He watched her relax as she understood his words. "I'm sure it's because I remember no woman before my wife. I love her you know."

"That is wonderful dear. I loved my Whitby all those years ago. The Admiral and I could have had a amiable relationship if his daughters hadn't filled his head with lies. But that is all done now. The Admiral is gone, and his daughters have banned me from visiting his grave at the family chapel.

"I pray for their souls, you know," she said wistfully. "The Admiral's, Whitby's, my brother's and your mother's and stepmother's."

"We all appreciate that, Aunt." He set his cup on the tray and rose. "Well, I must be off. I have some business to tend in Plymouth in the morning, and hope to make it home by Christmas."

After saying his good-byes, Ren left with an uneasy feeling. One that began the moment she started to speak of Thomas as though he were still alive. Ren lied to his aunt about where he was staying, just in case they buried the wrong man, and she told her son where to find him.

Ren weathered the cold wind and persistent mist to ride straight through to the inn near Falmouth where he met with the rest of his retinue and returned the borrowed horse. They then left immediately for London. He had to speak to Michael. He needed to know if Michael was certain that they'd buried Thomas on that day five months earlier.

One gray, snowy afternoon, Lia left her sitting room in search of the book she'd been reading. She couldn't remember where she'd set it down, and decided to start her search in the library, as that was the last place she remembered having it.

The children had been very excited during luncheon, and Elise and Lady Sewell explained to Lia about their holiday tradition of collecting holly one week before Christmas. It was a big event—an afternoon where the entire family and staff spent time hunting the perfect boughs with plump red berries for use in decorating. So Elise

and both children, along with several footmen and gardeners bundled up and went in out into the snow to cut only the best boughs.

While the children were out, Lady Sewell napped, as she would be the one directing all the decoration of the public rooms with greenery as soon as they returned. And, when they got back to the house, the children were promised warm chocolate and cookies by Cook.

After retrieving her book, Lia passed Mrs. Davies on her way to the linen pantry to see about the holiday table cloth for the family dining table. "Mrs. Davies, how much longer will the children be out?"

Mistaking her frown for one of worry, she added, "It usually takes an entire afternoon to collect the quantities necessary for decorating the entire home. If you're worried about the children, I know they are all bundled up nice and warm, and there are several footmen and gardeners with them Your Grace. You needn't worry."

"Oh, that isn't it, Mrs. Davies," she sighed. "It's just that I would have loved to get some crisp, fresh air myself."

"Your Grace, as much as any one of us would love to escort you on a walk outdoors, His Grace has ordered that you are not to leave the home." The housekeeper's expression, though sympathetic, told her she would not break her husband's wishes.

"I know," she said, the tone of dejection not lost on the other woman. A crash from the vicinity of the kitchens caught Mrs Davies' attention, and she excused herself. Once Lia had her book in hand, she turned to go back to her room, when another light contraction tightened across her belly. She held on to the back of a chair near the door, pressing a fist into her low back, hoping to relieve the muscle cramping. Once the muscles relaxed, Lia decided to return to her room for a nap.

She hoped this situation in Cornwall would be settled soon. She truly felt sorry for her husband's aunt. The widow lost her only child several months ago, and Lia could understand how the grief might cause the woman to lose her grasp on reality.

Lia thought about Ren's most recent letter, and his promise to be home in time for Christmas. She couldn't wait for him to return, and for their child to be born. Then she could resume a normal life. In the foyer, Lia looked up the marble staircase to the gallery landing, wondering if there were anyone she could call to escort her.

Odd, she thought, as Lia found herself suddenly alone. It was a strange feeling. Having been virtually shadowed for the past few months, she felt a bit uncomfortable standing there in the vastness of the hallway, with no one around.

Wrapping her shawl tighter around her shoulders, she placed a

foot on the first step, deciding to go up alone, just as she heard a knock at the front door. Lia waited, thinking someone surely would answer it.

A moment later, whoever it was knocked again. Realizing how cold it was out, and wondering if it were one of the children, she waddled to the door and pulled it open. She saw no one, and stepped out onto the great porch. "Children? Is that you Luchino? Playing games, are we?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ren sat in his office at Caversham House, with Michael across the desk from him. Both men tried to remember the condition of the body that had come out of the Thames that day in July. Michael was the first to see the beaten and decomposing body, as it took Ren a full day to return to Town after receiving Michael's urgent note, which meant Ren relied heavily on his friend's opinion.

Michael listed off the things he remembered. "First, we both acknowledge that the body was savagely beaten, shot, and spent at least a day in the river." After Ren nodded, Michael continued. "He appeared to be the right age, height and size, as Thomas. Your cousin was never as tall as you and I, nor as broad. The straight brown hair appeared the same. The face was less identifiable because of the beating it took with a club or heavy stick of some sort. Teeth were broken or missing altogether, and there was some damage caused by fish, and lastly, there was a ball to the chest, which is likely what killed him." Michael rested back in the chair. "I would make the same determination today, as I did that day."

Ren stood, went to the window, and looked out onto the street below. "The items found on the body, in the pockets were his. He was wearing the fob and watch that was his father's. The silver snuff box was engraved to him from a former mistress, and we verified she gifted that to Thomas several years ago."

It didn't feel right. Something about the whole thing just didn't feel right. Thinking on it, he decided it began with the personal effects on the body. Why didn't he question this before?

"There was no robbery," Ren mused aloud. "It was a well-known fact that Thomas was in dun territory. If a creditor sent a bludger after him, you'd think he'd remove anything of value Thomas had on his person." His eyes grew wide as he went on, the truth began to unfold. "But, if someone was trying to fake his death, wouldn't he choose a person who looked like him, and then plant some of his personal effects on the man? Then see to it that the one thing that would make him distinguishable from all others was destroyed?"

Michael started to catch his meaning. "The man's face was unrecognizable because of the beating."

Ren nodded as he began to pace the floor. "The beating alone, then throwing him into the river would have killed him. But what if the man was shot first, and already dead when the watch and snuff box were planted on the body. Then, knowing determination of identity would include, at least to some extent, facial recognition, they

beat the face beyond what is recognizable....” He turned to Michael and stated, “It all makes too much sense. It’s too clean. Too perfect.

“Millicent’s caretakers are trying to convince her she has not seen Thomas,” Ren told his friend, as he began to pace the length of his office. “But, what if Thomas is alive, and he did visit his mother. What if, Michael?” He stopped in front of his friend. “She said she prayed for the souls of our dead relatives, but never mentioned her own son. That’s what got me thinking. What if?”

Michael and Ren stared at each other for a moment, before Ren went back to his desk. Taking out a sheet of stationary, he began to pen a note. “This is for Cartland. I need to reinstate security at Haldenwood immediately. Thankfully, Lia is unable to leave the house, and Thomas isn’t fool enough to enter the home to steal her away. The staff all know him.”

“But they aren’t looking for him,” Michael noted, the disciplined attorney in him taking over. “They think Thomas is dead.”

He lifted the bell to ring it, when a commotion in the foyer belowstairs caught his attention. Footsteps running up sent him striding toward the door, and he opened it just as one of the young grooms from Haldenwood reached the landing. Mud-splattered and soaked from riding in the mist and snow, the lad collapsed into a heap at his feet.

“Her Grace has been abducted,” he panted, trying to catch a breath. “I came straightaway as soon as they noticed her gone. Men have been sent in all directions from the estate, Your Grace, covering every road, stopping every conveyance.”

From the darkest corner of his soul—a primal place so deep no compassion, no love of kin existed, he cried out. And once the pain and shock wore away, he started commanding the servants to various tasks, including sending for Cartland. Within the hour he, Michael, Cartland, and a dozen others rode hard through the evening and into the night to arrive at Haldenwood in the early hours of the morning.

Their investigation began immediately on the front porch, the scene of the abduction, where traces of his wife’s struggle still remained on the snow-covered porch. Each and every male employee, from the house steward and butler to the grooms and under-gardeners, was questioned about their findings. While Ren and Michael questioned the staff, Cartland and his men were out knocking on doors of every home in a ten mile radius, to see if anyone saw anything out of the ordinary.

As he questioned the footmen and gardeners who had gone out the day before, some on horseback, others on foot. Ren learned that they’d followed wheel tracks to the main road, and stopped every vehicle they saw on that road and all the smaller roads and drives that

broke off the main. Once each vehicle had been searched, the passengers were apologized to and sent on their way. All the staff said no one appeared criminal or suspicious in any way.

“How long was it before she was discovered gone?” Michael asked.

Mrs. Davies, the last to have seen her said, “About one hour, my lord. Her Grace came down to fetch a book, and planned to return to her room. Not long after that, her maid asked if we belowstairs had seen her mistress. That’s when we began the search.”

“How is it possible?” Ren’s voice rose to a tense roar, as he clipped, “Why was she left alone?”

“Your Grace, yesterday was bough cutting,” the housekeeper said through her tears. “You know, it’s something we do every year at this time.” The woman wiped her eyes, then added, “Everyone was so cheerful to go out, not just for the snow, but also it’s the first time in several years we’ve had a reason to be joyful, what with the new babe coming...,” this set the woman to weeping further. “We thought all was fine when we sent Lady Elise and the children out with several footmen and gardeners to protect them.”

“Do not blame the children or the staff, Your Grace,” said his grandmother as she entered his office at Haldenwood where the interrogations were taking place. “None of us had any way of knowing he would strike while the house was less guarded. Remember, we all believed him dead.”

Michael stepped forward. “Thomas spent many a holiday here. He knew the estate would be less guarded yesterday, as he knew your family’s tradition of bough cutting. That is why he visited his mother when he did. So that you would get called to Cornwall, leaving Her Grace here relatively unattended, making it easier for him to take her.”

Ren couldn’t help but agree with Michael’s assessment. His wife’s abduction was planned and calculated. Thomas took Lia, and Ren feared for her safety and that of his unborn child. But the more he thought about it, Thomas knew killing Lia would not get him what he sought, the money he needed and the title he wanted. Both of which Thomas could only get if he were to kill him. Holding Lia was intended to bring Ren to him, where Thomas would attempt to kill him again. Ren was terrified for his wife and child, but his fear increasingly turned more to anger as the minutes ticked by.

Cartland hurried into the room, and came up to them. “A tenant saw a black carriage speeding toward Town yesterday, at about the time Her Grace went missing. He said it almost ran him off the road as he was returning from helping a neighbor, that’s why he remembers the time.”

“He’s taken her to London,” Michael said.

“Let’s go,” Ren stressed. “I must find my wife.”

“God be with you, Your Grace,” his grandmother said after Ren kissed her cheek.

“Where I am going I don’t want God with me,” Ren replied. “He will be disappointed in me for what I’m about to do.”

The cold, windowless, damp cellar store room where Lia was being held reeked of innumerable foul odors. She heard slithering insects on the walls and rodents on the damp earthen floors. No air circulated to move the pungent smell of decay in the musty underground room. When she was abducted she’d been wearing only a shawl over her dress, and her body was becoming unable to fend off the temperatures.

Fumbling around in the dark when she’d awakened on the moldy mound of straw, Lia had found a lone wooden crate, turned it over and sat on it. In the days since she’d arrived, she hadn’t moved from that spot except to relieve herself in a corner of the room.

Another mild contraction tightened across her lower body. She took a deep breath, and expelled it slowly. The pains had begun a few hours back, and she remembered Dr. Prescott saying they had to be frequent and consistent before she sought her bed. They were neither yet. Lia had to rely on the doctor’s words, and since there were still long stretches passing between the spasms, she hoped she had plenty of time.

Time for what? How long had she been here? Three days or four? Her stomach growled, and she tried to think of something other than food or drink. She shivered in a feverish stupor. Her body was weakening by the hour and the babe seemed to sense her predicament and conserved its energy too. She didn’t want to die, but if she didn’t leave here soon, neither she nor the babe would survive this nightmare. Again, she prayed for her husband to find her soon. He loved her, and he wanted his child. This she was sure of.

Her head dropped forward and she closed her eyes. In the distance, she heard the heavenly sound of the bells of St. Paul’s again. It was noon, which meant she’d been in this old ice hole for four days.

Lia startled at the lock turning in the door, then a bright light pierced the darkened cell, as someone came down the steps. She squinted toward the blinding sight, a silhouette of a man descended the stairs, then she lost him in the dark room.

She heard the sound of a second man coming behind the first and their footsteps drew closer. Lia caressed her taut abdomen, hoping it was food or drink the guards brought. She hadn’t had anything to eat or drink since the day before.

“Well now, Your Grace, we would like to make you an offer.” The first man said as he stood over her seated form.

Lia grunted, too tired to even speak.

“Are you ready to go home to your husband?” the second man asked. “Cause we’re ready to send him that ransom note now that our transport is arranged.” The man paused as he bit from a meaty-smelling pastry. “Now be a good duchess and write the note, then we’ll share some of our pastries and ale with ye.”

Lia’s mouth watered at the thought of crumbs falling to the ground, wasted. What she’d give for a taste.

Her gaoler spoke through a mouth full of food. “Imagine how thrilled he will be to receive a note, by your own hand of course, telling him you, and more importantly his heir, are still alive. I think he would be willing to part with a good deal of coin. Don’t you?”

“He will kill you if he finds out who you are,” she said, feeling more energetic now than she had all day.

“I think not, Duchess,” the paunch-bellied man said before taking another bite. “Once I have my coin, I’m gone from this country. I’ll be rich enough to start over someplace else.”

Lia considered her words as her babe kicked fiercely within. The child wanted to live, and it was hard for her to fight this battle when the loser was not just herself, but also the son or daughter she carried.

“We’ll be rich like ye nobs out in Australia,” said the second man, “and no one will know who we are.”

She wanted to ask the man why he needed her to pen the ransom note, but got her answer a minute later when the second man muttered to the first, “It’s better this way. He’ll know she still lives.”

The second man replied, “We coulda been gone ’fore now if his lordship had wrote the note when we first got her.”

Lia snapped to attention in the dark room and hoped her jailers couldn’t see her face. She knew now, Lord Whitby was involved. She had to think quickly. She needed a way to let her husband know. Then it hit her. Write the note in Italian. These men were likely unable to write in their own language, much less hers. It made what she was about to do an enormous risk, though one she had to take if she was going to survive this nightmare.

“Sì,” she nodded, “I will do it,” she responded, her throat dry and her voice weak.

“Very wise of you. Now follow me.”

The bigger man of the two led the way to the stairwell, with the other following behind her. Lia took the stairs up very slowly, the small amount of energy it took to climb them drained her completely. She stopped once, midway up, and the man behind shoved her, prodding her to keep moving.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the bright sunshine streaming in through the grime-covered windows. Upon entering the cavernous warehouse, empty but for a few boxes and a desk, Lia gazed at the freedom of outdoors. It had been days since she breathed fresh air. Even the rank, river-smelling air up here seemed crisp and clean compared to the stench in that hole in the ground she'd been forced into days ago. Looking behind her she noted the building was partially burned and the roof on that side had collapsed.

The guard led her to a crate near the desk, and motioned for her to sit. The first man shoved a sheet of paper, an ink jar, and a blunt, broken quill at her. "Write down every thing I say," he said.

"I do not know English well enough to write in your language." She hoped God would forgive the lie. "I must write in my language."

"Can His Grace read your jibberish?" the shorter man asked.

"I hope so," Lia replied.

"As long as you're sure he can read it, I don't care," the taller one said.

She offered up a quick prayer of thanks, and began to compose her letter to her husband as her captor dictated his.

Ren stared out at the early morning light on Upper Brook Street, below his office window, and seethed inside. His wife was here in London. Another day was about to dawn and still he knew not where she was. And, the longer she wasn't in his care, the angrier he got.

She was likely in the underbelly of London somewhere, as this had been Thomas' home for the past year. His cousin had become one with the rats of the underground and sewers. There was nothing in the country for him to hide in or behind, especially near Haldenwood. The rank, nefarious slums of this town had been his home for so long now, Ren doubted that Thomas remembered he was born a gentleman.

As the investigator took his seat, Ren motioned for the footman to refill his cup with more coffee. He and Michael listened to the evening report from Cartland, when a disturbance in the halls at the rear of the Caversham House began to grow louder. Ren went to the door of his office just as the baize door slammed open and one of the investigator's men came running through the house and up the stairs.

"A note addressed to Your Grace arrived by messenger just now. The boy didn't know who sent him, only that he was to collect coin upon delivery. Your footmen are keeping the boy in the kitchens, and the cook is feeding him. We kept him here in case you want to question him." The young man looked at his employer, then at Michael, then back to Ren. "Shall I bring him up, Your Grace?"

"No," Michael said stepping forward while Ren took the note. "Keep him in the kitchen. We will send for him when we're ready."

Lia's handwriting on the letter caused Ren's stomach to lurch. Fighting down the urge to rip it open, he took a deep breath, broke the wax and unfolded the page. The words brought joy to his weary and frightened soul as he scanned the note, oddly written in Italian. He struggled to remember the translations from his school days, but he figured out enough to know where she was.

Dear Husband,

I am certain they cannot read this. Your cousin is involved, he is not here. There are two men guarding me, both have pistols.

They are keeping me in London, near the river. I hear the bells of St. Paul's. Look for an abandoned warehouse. The building is partly burned and the roof fallen in on one side. They keep me locked below ground in an old cold storage room.

Please hurry. My labor has begun and our child is coming soon.

I love you,

Your Lia

In the excitement of the moment, he choked with relief. "She's alive! We must hurry and find her," he said as he began to bark orders to the footman to have their horses and a closed carriage brought around. "Then find Prescott and have him here when we return. Tell the women to prepare for Her Grace's arrival."

Michael took the note from his hand and read it.

Ren gave the details to Cartland, who gathered all his men at the rear of Caversham House and ordered them to scour the miles of docks on both sides of the river, within sounding distance of St. Paul's, looking for abandoned, partially burned and collapsing warehouses. Once the building was discovered, the men were to find Cartland and Ren before entering.

He and Michael then gathered pistols from Ren's armoire. Taking his coat, he went out front, mounted his horse, and rode hard toward the warehouse district. With the force of his private army close behind him.

Lia fought back the tears from pain. She wiped her brow with her shawl, and silently cried out again for her husband. She hoped the note reached him soon. Lia didn't know how much longer she had before her child would have to make his entrance and she didn't want

her babe born here. These conditions, and her fever, were sure to kill them both.

Yesterday, she took an enormous risk writing her own note to her husband. From the moment she thought she could get away with it, she grew bold and told Ren everything she remembered as the guard dictated his ransom note. Now, as she heard the start of the noon bells at St. Paul's begin again on this, her fifth day, she prayed her husband might find her in time for her unborn babe to have a chance at survival. She didn't want to give birth in this vermin-infested hole in the ground. Their son or daughter deserved better.

Another contraction ripped through her, and she bit her fingers suppressing her screams. A flood of liquid gushed from her and ran down her legs. "Ren, hurry! Please hurry," she cried softly.

Some ninety men scoured the docks along the river, searching both sides simultaneously. Ren, Cartland and Michael watched the sun rise as they stayed together while each team reported their findings, then would fan back out covering new ground.

Just before noon they came upon the site one of his men reported, just off Blackfriar's road. Ren thought of Lia's description, *abandoned warehouse, building is partly burned, roof fallen in on one side*. Ren got an inexplicable feeling as he neared it. Then he heard bells and he knew.

"This is it," he said confidently.

Cartland nodded. "It's exactly what she described."

"She's here. I feel it." Ren moved toward the building. "Let's go."

The detective stayed him with an arm on his sleeve. "Wait a few minutes to see if anyone arrives. It will also give more of my men time to get here, and a chance to move in closer to evaluate the building."

"My wife is in there, possibly having my child while we sit here doing nothing!" Ren snapped. "I haven't time to wait!"

Before Ren had finished speaking, a rented hack pulled up in front of the building, and a cloaked figure disembarked. He watched as the man handed the hack his fare and went inside. Unable to discern if it was Thomas at this distance, Ren decided it didn't matter. Any affection he had for the cousin he once loved as a brother, was long gone. He turned to Michael and said, "If my wife or my child is dead, he dies a horrible, painful, and slow death."

The bells finished their song marking the noon hour. He looked at Cartland. "How long before we go in?"

The detective looked to his men, disguised as longshoremen, drunks and merchants, then gave the signal. "Give them two minutes to get into place."

Ren watched in awed silence as, without drawing any undue

attention to themselves, a score of men slipped toward the building. Minutes later, with pistols primed and raised, Ren, detective Cartland, and several other men moved toward the back door, while Michael and the others went to the other side of the building. Every possible exit to the warehouse was covered to prevent the kidnappers' escape.

"On my cue we move," Cartland whispered.

Ren nodded.

The detective signaled, one man silently turned the handle on the door. It was locked. On the count, two burly men stormed the door, breaking it from its hinges. Six men rushed forward with pistols raised, holding the prisoners inside at bay, while Cartland, Ren, and the others quickly followed, all armed and ready.

Ren took in the sparse surroundings, and the three occupants of the room. Behind a crude table, sat someone he'd once thought dead. Even with the black hair grease covering his blond waves, mustache and full sideburns, Ren recognized his cousin, Thomas Whitby.

All three men in the warehouse were in obvious shock. The big fellow raised a pistol and a shot rang out from behind Ren, echoing throughout the empty warehouse. The henchman fell backward onto the floor, one tiny hole between his eyes oozing blood as the room filled with the acrid scent of burned powder. The act stopped the other two occupants' movements.

"Anyone else?" Cartland warned.

Thomas lowered his weapon, a sardonic grin turning up the corners of his mouth. "So, cousin, we meet again."

"Where is my wife?" Ren demanded.

"She's at another location," his cousin said. "Her gaoler awaits my return before she's to be freed. Let me go and she will be returned unharmed." He made a slight move toward the door and was halted by an armed guard.

"You're goin' nowhere, m'lord," Cartland interjected, "You and yer friend'll both be swinging from the gallows shortly."

"*Where is my wife?*" Ren bellowed as he lurched for his cousin.

Thomas raised his weapon but before he got it level, Ren shot him in the chest, collapsing his cousin into a heap on the floor. The third henchman lurched for the door and Cartland's men caught him and led him out to the street.

Ren checked on his cousin's condition, though he knew from the close distance he'd taken the shot, Thomas was soon to die. He tried to speak, but could not. He coughed when he tried to take a breath, and soon made a sick gurgling sound. Ren knelt down and seeing his cousin's struggle, he demanded, "Where is my wife?"

"Be...", he paused and began to choke on his blood, "low," he finished.

Ren gave a curt nod in appreciation for that bit of information, then stood, telling his cousin, "Make your peace with God. You haven't long."

Just then Thomas closed his eyes and began to cough and spit out blood. His head fell to the side and blood began to pour from his mouth.

Ren began to scan the room, just as an agent shouted from the far side of the building, "There's a door here. It's locked tight. I can't budge it."

Just then everyone heard the frightening screams coming from the other side. Knowing it was his wife behind the door Ren ran forward and pounded at it, but it wouldn't budge.

Moments after she heard the gunshots, Lia heard the sounds of muted men's voices, and banging on the door at the top of the steps. Afraid for her life if she made more noise, she bit her lip, tasting her own blood as another contraction gripped her. She held on to the edges of the crate, and breathed deeply for the duration, relaxing as much as possible before another came. In the din upstairs, one deep, true sound was familiar.

Her husband's voice.

He's here! Holding her belly, she walked to the base of the steps and grasped the rail. She pulled herself up two steps and stopped. The familiar tightening sensation began again, indicating another contraction about to crescendo. This time Lia let her screams ring through the warehouse, knowing Ren would soon free her from this hell.

Ren fumbled with the set of keys Michael handed to him, having fished them off the dead henchman. After unlocking the door, he threw the bolt and yanked it open. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, but in the cold and stench-ridden hole, Ren saw his wife hunched over on the steps, gripping the rail, trying to pull herself up. He ran to her, lifting her into his arms, where she collapsed. He took the steps up cautiously, careful not to jostle her. Once in the light of the warehouse, he got a look at her. Her cracked lips had dried blood in the corners and her once-beautiful green eyes had sunk into her now ashen face. When Lia shivered he pulled her closer, disregarding her damp, reeking clothing.

Hurrying through the warehouse, he stopped in front of the remaining henchman. "If she dies," Ren growled, "I will kill you myself."

Doors opened for him as he carried her to his coach and laid her gently on the seat, covering her with his cloak. Ren began to issue

orders as he stroked his wife's damp cheek and fevered brow. Lia's eyes flew open and held his gaze as she began to wail softly, then more loudly, while she grimaced in agony.

His vehicle was quickly escorted across town to his house, where Prescott waited in the Duchess' suite.

"Burn the clothing," Ren said as he began to undress his wife. He had to hold back his tears as he saw what condition she was really in. She'd obviously struggled against her bindings as her wrists were bruised. Above one eye, right at the hairline, her forehead sported a knot the size of an egg, with split skin and dried blood, as though she'd been hit with a heavy object. Her hair was caked with dried mud, infested with fleas and likely worse. In her fevered state she shivered and swat at imaginary pests around her face and arms.

"We must bathe her thoroughly," the physician said. "In my experience the wounds are less likely to fester if they are kept clean."

Moments later two maids assisted Ren in bathing his wife, all the while she labored through her contractions in a state of semi-consciousness.

After three washings with lye soap, her hair was still infested. On the prompting of Prescott, Ren closely cropped all of her glorious dark brown tresses himself, refusing to let anyone else do the deed.

"It will grow back, love," he whispered to her as he finished the task. His wife never heard his words for she doubled over on the floor, in the midst of another strong contraction. Ren carefully lifted her blanketed body and placed her in the center of the bed.

"Let's get her raised against the headboard," the physician ordered. "It will make the birthing easier."

Once they had her propped against the pillows of her bed, Ren paced the room, crazy with worry for his wife—and for their child. He wanted to help her, wanted to take her pain from her, but all he could do was groan in frustration. And pace.

His entire world was on that bed. She was his life. Without her, he didn't want to live.

"It would be best if you leave now, Your Grace" Prescott said. "It won't be much longer."

He wanted to be with her. She needed him, and he'd be damned if he was leaving. He met Prescott's level gaze steadily, and said, "I stay."

"As the babe comes, it's not a sight you'll want to witness." The physician giving him an opportunity to change his mind.

Suddenly a guttural cry ripped through his wife, as she forced herself forward, bearing down in the throes of the birthing process.

Dear God, do not let her die. Do not take her from me.

Prescott moved the sheet aside to check Lia's progress. Ren

moved closer, giving her his hand. She squeezed it with a force he didn't know she had.

The physician ordered Lia to stop pushing, and reached for a wet cloth. "Good. Good girl," Prescott cooed soothingly. He placed the unfolded wet cloth in his hands, and called to Lia, "Now push again! A big push, Your Grace, for you have a big babe."

Ren looked down and witnessed his babe's head and face as it emerged. Lia let out a sob of relief and momentarily relaxed before taking a deep breath and finishing the task. Soon, the babe's screaming wails filled the room, and Prescott chuckled reassuringly, handing the infant over to one of the maids. Afterward, Lia fell back onto the pillows, exhausted from her effort. Her eyes still closed, she wept.

Ren heaved a relieved sigh, then pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. "It's over now, love," he whispered to her. "We have our babe." He choked down tears, thankful for the child he now had, yet fearing for his wife.

"Congratulations, Your Grace," Prescott said. "You have a son."

"Did you...," he cleared his throat and started again. "Did you hear that, sweetheart? We have a son." She didn't move or speak an acknowledgement of the child. In fact, if it weren't for her rapid pulse and tears, he might have thought her....

No! She was not dying, and he would not allow that thought to enter his mind. He did need reassurance from Prescott that all was proceeding well, and that she would live. She had to live.

"Will she be all right?" Ren asked.

"Only time will tell us how she fares," the doctor replied as he worked on Lia. "She's weak from the fever, and giving birth took what little strength she had remaining." He looked up at Ren and said, "For the time being I recommend hiring a wet nurse, since we don't know for certain how long it will be before Her Grace awakens and can care for the babe."

Too choked to reply, he simply nodded his head and made a note to have Mrs. Steen hire a wet-nurse.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

He felt powerless. For the first time in his entire life, Marcus Renfield Halden was not in control.

Lia's fever raged all through the night. While Prescott slept in the next room, Ren and Lia's maid, Ghita, took turns bathing her down with cool cloths, fighting the fire which threatened to consume the woman who was his soul.

"Your Grace, I was wondering," the maid said shyly in her native tongue as she poured more water into the bowl.

"Yes, Ghita?"

The girl looked pensively down at their patient. "When I was young I remember my sister had a fever like this." She seemed hesitant to finish. "My mother put her in the tub and filled it with cool water with vinegar, sponging it over her whole body for hours. It worked for her, so I thought..." She trailed off, backing away from the bowl and curtsied before turning away.

Ren sat silently wiping his wife's ashen face with the cloth. He had nothing to lose. If he lost her without fighting for her, without even trying the maid's suggestion, he'd never forgive himself.

Lia's lips moved, though he could not hear her words.

"What is it, love?" he asked.

"*Voglio vivere*," she whispered through her cracked lips. A tear fell from the corner of her eye to trail down her temple.

Ren lifted her hand and kissed it. "Yes, you *will* live," he said. Then, in a stern, yet shaky voice, he added, "I'll not accept anything else."

Lia gave him a weak smile. He considered the maid's idea, and thought it had merit. At this point he was willing to try anything to save his wife.

He leveled his gaze on the maid. "Have the kitchen send up enough water to fill the tub. Not cold, not warm, but cool. And the vinegar. Tell cook how much you think we will need."

"Yes, Your Grace." The maid broke into a timid smile, then ran off to do his bidding.

Once Lia's hip bath was partially full, Ren submersed his wife, pouring the rest of the water over her, testing each bucket's temperature before doing so. When the tub would hold no more, he bathed her with a cloth.

He repeated the procedure until Lia's fingers and toes were shriveled. Then he lifted her, carrying her to the bed, where he patted her dry. Maybe it was his imagination, but he thought she felt cooler

to his touch. He placed a sheet and blanket over her, then stoked the fire in the hearth before returning to her side.

The cool bath seemed to work. For a time at least. If she got hot, he'd bathe her again. And again and again if necessary, until she was well.

Pulling the chair closer to the bed, he lowered his own exhausted frame into it, and nodded off. He awoke when Ghita entered later with a dinner tray for him.

"I also brought a bowl of chicken broth and fresh bread, in case we can get Her Grace to wake. Cook said she's going to need proper nourishment to get well."

Ren looked at the maid gratefully. "She seems to be less fevered. Thank you, Ghita. For everything."

The girl's face turned a rosy pink. "'Twas nothing, Your Grace. Just my mother's remedy for a fever."

He picked at the food on the tray, a little hungry, but more concerned for his wife. Lifting her hand, he rubbed the cool fingers, asking her to wake up and talk to him. And when he wasn't talking to Lia, he was praying. He swore to his maker that he would not give up his wife without a fight.

Later that night, he heard her stir. He moved closer to her, and stroked her brow. No longer feverish, he said a prayer of thanks before kissing her cheek.

Her lashes fluttered and she slowly opened her eyes. Her once sparkling emerald orbs were now a dull green as she focused on his face. She tried to speak, but no words came. His heart clenched as he watched her eyes fill with tears.

"Don't worry, love," he whispered as he brought a cup with cool water to her lips. "Try to drink for me."

She did but he spilled more of it down her chin than into her mouth, bringing a faint smile to her lips.

"I knew I could make you smile again if given the chance," he said with a subdued cheerfulness.

Her hand went to her abdomen and she rubbed the fleshy emptiness. "The babe?" she asked hoarsely.

"The babe is fine," he assured her. "We called in a wet nurse because I wasn't sure how long...."

"Boy?"

"Yes, love," Ren said. "We have a strong, healthy son."

Lia closed her eyes, and took a deep, ragged breath. He held her hand and lightly stroked the inside of her wrist.

"Love, you need to get better. For our son. He needs you." Ren hesitated a moment, his throat choked with emotion, and added, "I

need you.”

She looked up at him again, tears spilling over her lashes.

“Don’t cry, love.” Ren moved to lie on his side, next to her. He held her close, relishing the feel of her. He nuzzled her neck, and whispered, “I love you, wife.”

Lia lifted a hand to her hair, noticing his handiwork with the razor. She pulled away and turned frightened, questioning eyes to his.

“I had to. Prescott ordered it after Ghita and I were unable to....” Ren trailed off, not wanting to remind her of what had happened. “It will grow back,” he said with half-hearted reassurance. “I know it will be years before it’s as long as you had it, but I promise it will come back.” He nuzzled her ear again, and whispered, “I actually find it quite attractive. We should have done it much sooner.”

At this, his wife laughed.

A dull grayish-pink light began to fill the room in the early morning hours before sunrise. Behind her, her husband snored softly, finally getting the rest she knew he needed, for he looked almost as weary as she felt. She had no idea how long it had been since she’d given birth, but she was ready to see her son. Ready to hold him, nurse him, and be his mother. Moving to the side of the bed, she pushed herself up, dropping her legs over the edge, and attempted to stand.

Mistake. Every muscle in her body felt ripped to shreds and screamed in agony. Her throbbing head spun faster than a windmill on a stormy day, forcing her back down on the bed.

Her swollen breasts ached painfully and began to tingle at the thought of her babe. Lia reached her hands up to cover them, hoping to ease the discomfort. She gasped and drew them away quickly, her palms wet.

“You’re still very weak, Lia,” her husband said from behind her. “Don’t try to stand.”

“I want to see our son.” She turned pleading eyes to him, holding out her hands. “I need to feed him.”

“Mrs. Steen found a nurse for him,” he explained. “You don’t have to worry about doing that. Perhaps it would even be best, just to make sure you get well.”

“No,” Lia argued. “He is my babe and I shall nurse him. Not another.”

His silver gaze was compassionate for her plight. “Prescott will be by this morn to see how you are. Let him be the one to decide if you are ready to nurse, after all he is the physician.”

“I am fine. I want my son,” she said. “Either you bring him to me or I will go to him.” Lia tried to rise again, and Ren stood in front of

her, refusing to let her stand.

"I'll have him brought to you." He pulled the bell. "But first I would see you drink some broth. You need to regain your strength."

Ghita arrived with breakfast for her master and mistress, and Ren asked that she send to the nursery to have the child brought down.

"One more spoonful, Lia," her husband ordered later.

"I can't swallow another."

"One more, or I won't allow you to hold my son," he threatened through his smile.

She obediently opened her mouth and he spooned in more broth. The knock at the door kept him from coercing her to have another. Her husband set the bowl down on the bedside table, and bid the servant enter.

The baby's nurse came in carrying a wrapped bundle and handed it to Ren. The girl curtsied and exited the room after talking to her employer in hushed tones. Sitting up straight, Lia craned her neck to get a better glimpse of the babe, but could tell nothing from all the blankets covering him.

Climbing carefully back onto the bed, Ren handed his newborn infant to his wife. Fighting tears of relief at his well-being, Lia held their son close, lowering her face into the babe's dark hair, breathing in his scent, committing him to her memory. A tear trickled down her cheek as she kissed his dark curls. Setting the bundle in her lap, she gently drew back the swaddling, and examined her sleeping babe.

Long and chubby, he had all ten fingers, and all ten toes. She sighed, as her heart swelled with pride at the sight of her offspring, and she again thanked God for the gift of this tiny life. He stretched, yawned, then settled himself back into his slumber, and Lia adored him.

Most of his features it seemed were his father's. Aside from inheriting her olive complexion, he had his sire's nose, mouth and black hair. She looked at her husband for comparison, then back to their son. He even had the same stubborn set to his baby chin.

"I think he will have your eyes," Ren whispered, seeming to know her thoughts.

She shivered as Ren's fingers traced a path along her jaw, resting at her chin. He turned her face up to his. Lia's lower lip quivered as her eyes filled with tears. "I love you," she said as he leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on her lips, then her cheek.

"I love you too, Lia. And I thank you for our son," he said.

Later that night, Ren watched as his wife nursed their son. Earlier that day, Prescott had been surprised by her quick recovery, and deemed her fit enough, providing she ate, to feed the babe.

Ren wrote his grandmother earlier that afternoon after Lia

lamented being away from the rest of the family for the holy day, asking that the family come immediately to share Christmas with them as Lia could not yet travel. Hopefully before dinner the next day, his grandmother, Elise, and the children would be in London. He asked that they bring all the presents, because Lia did not want any of the children opening their gifts before Christmas morning, and wanted to be with them when they did. And, because she was ordered to remain abed, her rooms at Caversham House were decorated with garlands, boughs, and wreaths to cheer her.

With Christmas just a day away, he knew this would make his wife happy—to have her new family together for their first Christmas.

EPILOGUE

January 1820

“How does it look?” Lia needed an honest opinion.

Ren’s face screwed into a sour look. He shook his head. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“This is the last one.” Lia looked again at her image in the mirror. She, too, gave a negative shake of her head. “Madame Fuichard thought all the designs looked wonderful on me.”

“I rather think she was after the coin, love,” Ren said truthfully. “I have told you I’ve become accustomed to seeing you with short hair, and I have, on more than one occasion, told you how attractive it is.”

Lia lifted the wig from her head and placed it on the block.

“No one has hair as short as mine. Even the more fashionable married women with short hair wear it longer than this. And they all have a wonderful head full of curls framing their faces.” She grabbed her short ends for emphasis. “Mine is so short it lies flat and doesn’t move.”

He came behind her, wrapping his arms around her. Nuzzling her neck he whispered, “It becomes you, sweetheart.”

“Yes, but, what about this evening? This is an important event for Elise. For our family.”

“I guarantee you will be the most beautiful woman in the room, with or without a wig,” Ren assured her, as he met her gaze in the mirror.

“You don’t think....”

He placed his index finger over her lips, silencing her. “What I think,” Ren said, “is that you are more beautiful without a wig.” He trailed tiny kisses down the sloping column of her neck, sending a wave of warm pleasure sluicing over her. She turned into his arms, and melted against him, loving the feel of him, needing his strength.

Two hours later, standing under the west portico of St. Paul’s on a cold and wet January day, one month after their son’s birth, Ren and Lia awaited the arrival of one more coach. In the nave of the cathedral were his friend Michael, cousins Cully and Flynn, Lia’s brother, and their son, Marcus Renfield Halden, the Fourth.

It was to be a small family ceremony as she’d requested, christening the newest member of the family, Ren’s son and heir Marcus. Lia pulled the fur-trimmed hood of her cloak lower over her forehead to block some of the wind.

“Cold?” Ren asked.

“Not all of me,” she answered. “Just my ears.”

“Would you like to go in?”

“No. Then I’d have to remove my cloak and my head is almost as bare as Angus’s”

Ren laughed softly. “Not quite, darling,” he said as he held her close sharing his warmth with her. “Bridget did an excellent job cleaning up the mess I made of your hair. It’s grown a great deal since I butchered it, and is really quite chic and feminine.”

Just then, rounding the south side of the cathedral, came the last of their party. Ren’s grandmother, his uncle Angus, and Lia’s two sisters-in-law descended from the shiny black-lacquered coach bearing the Caversham crest.

They greeted one another in front of the massive doors of the church, and Ren ushered them in out of the bitter winter winds. Once inside, Lady Sewell, on the arm of her son, Angus, beamed with pride as she immediately made for her great-grandson, and lovingly lifted him out of the arms of his nurse. Sarah dropped her cloak on the ground, and Elise picked it up. The little girl ran after Luchino, who was quickly becoming her idol because he’d been on a sea voyage and she had not.

Ren helped his wife off with her cloak, and noticed her uneasiness with her close-cropped hair when her hands came up to cover her head. He leaned down and placed a chaste kiss on her cheek, whispering, “You’re beautiful darling, and I love you.”

Turning to his sister, Ren asked, “What took you so long? We expected you here twenty minutes ago.”

Elise turned her gold-flecked brown eyes to her big brother and directly held his gaze. “Well, you see, I was having difficulty deciding what to do with my hair.”

Ren winced at his sister’s words, and glanced at his wife, whose eyes were instantly swimming with tears. He turned back to his sister, intent on scolding her for being so insensitive to his wife’s feelings, but his eyes widened in shock as Elise drew back her hood and smiled broad as she removed her cloak.

“So I decided to just cut it all off.” Her eyes gleamed with excitement as she looked at Lia, adding, “It was so straight and I never could do a thing with it anyway. Also, you should know I’ve asked Bridget to be my maid because she has such a keen eye for style. Goodness knows I’ll need all the help I can get next year.”

Ren roared with laughter, the sound echoing throughout the cavernous cathedral, drawing the gazes of everyone in attendance.

Looking back at him, Elise grinned. “Now, let’s find that cleric,” she said confidently as she strode into the cathedral. “And where is my cousin and Lord Brightman? I’m eager to become a Godmother.”

THE END

Sign up for Sandy's mailing list to be the first to learn about her new releases.

www.sandyraven.com/connect

AUTHOR'S NOTE

≈ ≈ ≈

Putting our work “out there” makes most artists feel vulnerable in some way. But, for a few of us, there is nothing in the world we would rather be doing than creating stories that touch the heart, no matter the fear of scrutiny. I hope you enjoyed reading about Ren and Lia as much as I enjoyed writing their story. If you did, please leave a rating or review at the vendor where you purchased this book. Because I truly believe all constructive criticism helps writers better themselves at this craft we love so much.

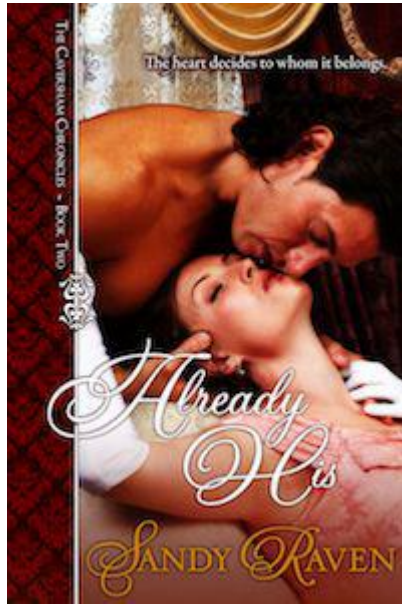
≈ ≈ ≈

Enjoy an excerpt from the next book in the series.

The Caversham Chronicles—Book Two

ALREADY HIS

Sandy Raven



The Caversham Chronicles continue in Book Two, ***Already His***, with the story of Ren's sister, Elise, and his best friend, Michael.

[Available Now](#)

PROLOGUE

Woodhenge (near Goring), Summer 1808

Michael Brightman, heir to the pile of crumbling stone in which he currently found himself, hurried through the narrow corridors, eager to reach the rooms he kept in this, his uncle's home. He thought about his odds of finding a willing wench among the kitchen or laundry staff at that moment, but decided against it. And the village was certainly too far to travel in the middle of his older sister Sabrina's wedding feast, take care of business, and return. Damn his balls, but the past two hours of staring at Miss Stansbury's delectable décolletage—and envisioning his face planted between those luscious breasts—caused an uncomfortable tightness in his breeches that would need relief soon, whether by his own hand, or a willing woman.

He'd prefer the latter, but in a bind his hand would do.

He hurried through the chilly hallway of the family wing and slowed his pace when he heard the muted sobbing and delicate sniffing of a young lady as he passed the priest hole. The medieval tapestry that hung on the wall to his left had been the handiwork of several of his early female ancestors and their ladies, and had been in that same spot for over three hundred years. Only a few knew the true purpose of the tapestry was not in displaying the battle scene which won the first Earl of Camden his title, but rather it served to hide the entry of a secret passageway. The tiny room hid a stairwell leading to an escape route from the castle that not many knew about, so Michael wondered who it was hiding during his sister's wedding feast. The room had been a favorite of his and his sisters when they were children. He and Christina used to play in the secret room, and hide from their nurses when they were young. Thinking on it, he hadn't seen her below in some time, and he just passed Sabrina and his mother, so likely this was Christina. He wondered what had her so upset?

Glancing up and down the corridor and seeing no one, he moved the tapestry and slid behind it. Running his hand along the wall, he reached the open entry to the priest hole which began the escape route his relatives used on more than one occasion when the castle had been attacked.

As expected, he found Christina, in the tiny antechamber to the stairwell, with a solitary taper lit on the table. The room was unchanged since the last time he'd been there, with only one small table and two chairs filling the space.

He stood in the doorway, feeling as though the entire room had grown smaller over the past few years. Michael watched as Christina blew her nose delicately into a linen. His heart wrenched for her, his little sister. "If you had shut the door," he said, "I never would have heard you weeping." He put his hand on her back, wanting to give her his sympathy for whatever was breaking her heart. "Why aren't you below, enjoying the festivities?"

"No reason," she sniveled and wiped her nose. "I'm simply feeling sorry for myself."

"I know you better than to believe that nonsense. You're the least likely girl to feel sorry for herself that I know." He stroked her back gently. "Come now, dry your eyes." Michael tried to sound cheerful, thinking to get his sister back out into the great hall where the party was ongoing. "Tell me who it is that has you in tears and I will make sure the bouncer pays for your upset."

"I cannot."

"Absolutely you can. You know I'm not averse to pummeling the face of the Prince himself if he were the one, though I doubt you'd find him to your liking."

Christina dabbed at her eyes with her kerchief and shook her artfully arranged golden curls. "No. It would drive a wedge into your friendship. Even though he was not the only young man standing near me, when I turned I saw no one but Glencairn. I just hope Lord Vance did not witness his actions, because *he* is the man I am most interested in. Glencairn, though of noble birth, will certainly wind up a drunken, debauched rake. If he were to ever marry, he will not make the unfortunate young lady a good husband."

"What did he do?" Michael had to ask, though he was not certain he really wanted to know because he hated the thought of having to call out his friend.

Christina started a convoluted explanation, and in between wiping her tears and blowing her nose, Michael thought he heard her misspeak. "He did *what?*" Michael's ire rose, especially when he realized of whom she spoke. "Glencairn touched you inappropriately? In front of others? Where?"

She nodded.

"Christina, tell me exactly what did Glencairn do?" Before he pounded his friend's face into a bloody pulp, he wanted to be certain of his actions.

"We were leaving the dance floor after a long, exhausting country dance, where Mr. Hampton was my partner, and Glencairn partnered Miss Prudence Chichester. There was such a crowd on the way to the refreshment table as it was the end of a set. Lord Vance was nearby, on my left, and Glencairn was directly behind me. I felt a large warm

hand, masculine to be sure, touch me..." she dropped her voice to a whisper, "on my..." she seemed to struggle with saying where Ren touched her.

"Where did he touch you Christina?"

She pushed the heavy wooden door closed, and whispered, "He more than touched my bottom, Michael, he... he *squeezed* it! I have never been so shocked in all my life. That's when I turned around to see your friend standing directly behind me acting nonchalantly, as though what he'd done was of no consequence."

His sister went into another bout of tears, repeating her fear that Vance might have seen what Ren did, and that her chances with him were now forever ruined. Michael wanted to slam his fist into Ren's ugly mug for what he did to cause his sister such distress. He knew better than anyone what a profligate rake his friend was. Michael had to warn him away from ever touching his sister again. At sixteen, Christina was too young and innocent for the likes of him.

Michael had heard enough. He wanted nothing more than to pummel his friend into the ground for taking liberties with his sister, but held his anger in check for her sake. He strode from the room, and went in search of Lord Glencairn, his best friend for ten years, since their very first day at Eton when they were both eight years old. The bouncer had touched his sister inappropriately and by damn he would apologize to her.

Michael found Ren in the old castle's receiving room which was the official card room for the evening. He sat with one of his new brother-in-law's relations, Michael forgot the fop's name, and several other young rakes, most of whom were older than they, Lord Vance among them. As Michael drew nearer, his friend met his gaze and gave him a lazy smile, likely influenced by the amount of alcohol he'd consumed.

Ren stood. "Would you like my seat Michael? I'm thinking about asking Miss Chichester for another dance. Hopefully a country dance where she has to skip a time or two." His friend leaned in closer and whispered, "I keep hoping those glorious breasts of hers will come bouncing out of that low cut gown."

Michael had heard enough. He swung first and clipped Ren on the jaw.

"What in hell was that for?"

"I think you know," Michael hissed as he swung again, only this time Ren was able to deflect the blow.

The other guests in the room leaped from their chairs and cleared the floor for the two young bucks to fight.

"Is this about Prudence Chichester?" Ren said as he kept out of Michael's reach. "I didn't know you were interested in her."

He shook his head, swung at Ren again who deflected his strike.

"Are you drunk, Michael? I'll admit to having a few myself, but not...." Ren swung, Michael ducked and came around, only to feel the force behind his friend's punch to his rib cage.

Michael grabbed Ren and wrestled him to the ground. "Did you touch my sister inappropriately?" He hissed only loud enough for Ren to hear his words. Heaven forbid that action were made public. It could ruin Christina.

"You're either drunk or insane, Michael," the young Lord Glencairn replied as he held Michael down.

But Michael was only momentarily pinned because he shoved Ren hard enough to roll his friend beneath him. Pressing his elbow into Ren's shoulder, pinning him, as he reached out with his free hand and grabbed Ren's wrist. "I'm neither, you ass, and you owe my sister an apology."

The double-ring of young men circling them began to shout and Michael heard one of them call out, "Tell us what the fight's about!"

Michael just grunted, not one to make public his emotions. He spoke in a low tone for Ren alone to hear. "My sister is in tears upstairs. She said you squeezed her bottom coming off the dance floor."

"I did not," Ren hissed, "and I won't apologize for something I didn't do."

Michael lessened the pressure into Ren's shoulder and shifted his weight, which proved a tactical error because he was soon back under his friend. Michael heard his coat tear and thought about the peal his valet would ring over him in the morning. "She's upstairs crying because she said you touched her in a most egregious manner." He struggled for a breath as his friend bore the brunt of his weight onto his chest, pinning him with a leg up. "She's my little sister!"

"Gad, Michael! You'd think I tupp'd her for the reaction you're giving me." Ren pressed Michael's leg a little higher up and he felt a burning sensation on the back of his thigh as he tried to buck his friend off.

"Don't talk about my...." Michael strained, trying to best Ren and roll them over, "Don't talk about my sister like that!"

"I gave you my word, so I don't... understand why..." Ren grunted when Michael pushed up with the one foot he had on the stone floor, and tried to roll them over. "You'd believe her and not me."

Michael heard material tearing, and wasn't certain if it was his or Ren's. "Did you...."

"I swear I haven't touched your sister!"

"You will promise me you'll never touch her," Michael hissed in Ren's ear.

"Believe me," Ren said, "I have no desire to dally with your sister!" Ren weakened his hold a moment, and Michael rolled Ren under him.

"I want your word on that," Michael said, shoving his knee into Ren's groin for leverage.

"Bloody hell," Ren ground out. "Only if I get yours in return."

"You're a sick sod." Michael strained against the material which held him captive more than his friend. "Your sister's yet a babe."

The sound of shouting finally reached the confined circle of onlookers watching their debased efforts.

"Remember that when we're older and she's on the market," Ren hissed.

"Do I have your word," Michael demanded just before Ren flipped him on his back.

"Do I have yours?" As the words left his mouth the entire room fell silent. It was then that he knew someone, or likely more than one persons of importance, had entered. Persons of enough rank and presence to command the parting crowd to silence.

"Glencairn, get off the floor." In a deadly calm voice, one known to make lesser men's knees buckle, His Grace, the eighth Duke of Caversham, addressed his son. Then he added, "Brightman, the same for you."

Ren wiped the blood from his nose and lip before meeting Michael's gaze one last time before they separated. "Then we're in agreement? Sisters are off limits?"

"Glencairn," Ren's father repeated, "Now."

Michael didn't speak, but met Ren's cold silver gaze and nodded.

Haldenwood, Summer 1812. At the occasion of the marriage of the eighth Duke of Caversham to Lady Amelia Manners-Sutton.

Looking down from her perch in the oak tree near the terrace off her father's office, Lady Elise Halden decided she would run away and join the gypsies. Gypsy children were free to roam the countryside and do as they wished, including fish and shoot their bow and arrows. Gypsy children could ride their ponies whenever they wanted for as long as they wanted. Gypsy children didn't have to obey to the wishes of their nanny, governess or tutors—all of whom prevented her from doing the aforementioned activities as she pleased.

And as of today, she would now have to add a stepmother to the ranks of *those ordering her about*.

Footsteps on the terrace told her someone was pacing, albeit slowly. She didn't think anyone was looking for her, as no one ever did. Curiosity almost got the better of her. She knew if she shifted her

position to look behind her, the tree would move alerting the person on the terrace of her presence. After a few minutes she caught a whiff of tobacco smoke and realized someone had come outside to puff on a cheroot. If she did not move, she could go undetected and be left in peace.

She heard the heavy footfall of a another man step outside, then recognized her brother Ren's voice as he spoke.

"Why do unwed ladies think that the happy occasion of celebrating a marriage is the perfect place for choosing a husband? I had to escape the dancing before one of my new stepmother's young relatives finagled me into a compromising position. I've just turned twenty-two and far from ready to marry."

"I don't know how you were able stay in there as long as you did," the other voice replied, "I felt very much like meat hanging at the butchers." There was a pause as the young man dragged on his cheroot. After he exhaled, he continued. "During our entire dance, Miss Valerie Morton informed me of her age and that she has made her bow."

"Nothing wrong with that," Ren said.

"Oh, but she then listed a long string of accomplishments as though she were applying for a position. She then asked why she hadn't seen either of us at any of the events in Town. I told her I was busy studying and you were often out of the country."

Her brother grunted as he sighed, one of his few outward signs of frustration she'd learned long ago. "The lady with whom I danced, my new stepmother's cousin, though not unattractive is not my type," Elise heard Ren say. "What's worse, she is following me around like a spaniel, complete with big brown puppy eyes." Her brothers voice dropped to just above a whisper as he said, "You know I much prefer the petite blonds with blue eyes and bounteous breasts."

The conversation was getting interesting, so she shifted slightly on her perch in order to better see to whom her brother spoke. She went as far out onto the limb as she dared.

"When the time comes that I must take a bride, I want a lady with spirit and courage." She got a look at the man with her brother and recognized him as one of his friends she'd seen before. Michael Brightman's handsome brown hair and hazel green-brown eyes made her heart flip in her breast. What an odd sensation she thought. "She must enjoy the hunt, fishing and chess. We should converse on topics beyond fashion, romantic novels and housewifely skills."

"There you are." Elise heard a female voice address the two young men. "Come inside, gentlemen. The dancing is about to start again and the numbers are uneven for a reel. We really need you both."

“Yes, ma’am,” her brother said.

“Yes, mother,” Michael replied.

Both young men left the terrace to rejoin the festivities and Elise felt an incredibly superb idea hatch in her brain. She would have to marry eventually, and so would Lord Brightman. He might be an appropriate match for her, she would have to check. Certainly he was a gentleman with a title and was connected to an earl somehow. And just last week when discussing her own father’s upcoming marriage to Lady Amelia with her governess, the dour-faced old woman tried to instill in Elise the importance of marrying within the proper bloodlines.

Elise didn’t care about bloodlines, except in the case of the horses in her father’s stables.

All she knew was that listening to Michael just now proved to her that they were perfect for each other. As she listened to him list the attributes he looked for in a bride, she realized she fit each and every one of his criteria.

Before the week-long wedding celebration was over, she would convince one Michael Brightman that they belong together and should marry. Their situations were so very similar, as neither was ready to marry. Why, she had to wait at least four more years because she heard Catriona in the kitchen say she was fourteen when she married James the under-gardener. Elise heard this just the other day when the staff was talking about how young her new step-mama was, and how she was soon to present her papa with another babe.

She had to get to her room to think out a plan. As she saw it, the situation was very similar to what Old Ned taught her about horse training. Elise didn’t see a difference. She needed to make the horse *want* do her bidding, as the old man always said. And to do that she needed a plan before she climbed onto the horse’s back.

“But first I have to get out of this tree,” she said to herself. She looked down and decided it was a too high to jump down, even with the green limb bending low under her weight. She also might hit the branch beneath her, and that would hurt something fierce. No, she had to get to the trunk and climb her way back down the way she came. Reaching for a limb over her head to hold onto for balance, she stretched up an arm while at the same time holding fast to the branch on which she sat.

“Oh, fiddle-faddle. Come here.” Elise reached out again, this time grasping a cluster of new leaves and then the branch. She felt the seam under her arm tear and swore again. “Maisy will be angry now that I’ve torn my dress.” She’d never hear the end of it from her maid. And if her father found out.... Oh, heaven. She’d likely be punished, and that was after she got spanked.

She tried to keep her hold of the branch over her head while she scooted toward the trunk, but she was unable to do so without ruining the dress further. Grabbing the branch over her head with both hands now, she tried to pull herself up when she heard a crack and felt herself falling, only to have her skirts snag on a branch, stopping her descent.

In the blink of an eye, Elise both thought she would die and realized she wouldn't. She almost wished for death when she realized she wasn't alone. On the terrace, fanning herself, was one of her father's guests, Lord Brightman's mother, Lady Richard. And here Elise was hanging by her skirts from a branch in an oak tree. She supposed it was a good thing that it was her and not a male guest witnessing her humiliation.

The sound of fabric tearing echoed throughout the side garden. Just as Lady Richard reached her, Elise felt the material give and she squealed as she fell the rest of the way down, landing in the arms of the woman, sending both of them falling to the ground.

Elise rushed to get off Lady Richard, hoping she hadn't killed her. When she didn't move, Elise knelt beside her and took her gloved hand in her ungloved ones and pat it, as it was what she saw the housekeeper do whenever a housemaid fainted. She then began to pray as she hadn't prayed since the last time she was about to get caught at something she wasn't supposed to do.

Lady Richard groaned and moved, and Elise heaved a sigh. As soon as the woman opened her eyes, Elise knelt over her and began to apologize profusely.

"Ma'am, I am so very sorry. Please do not.... my father will be so very angry."

"Move aside," said the woman with gray streaks in her ruined coif as she sat up. Elise handed Lady Richard the pearl-encrusted comb that fell from her once artfully-arranged hair, then rose and stretched out a hand. She ignored Elise's offer of assistance and rose on her own, then began to dust off her backside. The lady's aqua colored dress was now in disarray and probably stained as well. Elise apologized again for her behavior, and prayed Lady Richard didn't want retribution for Elise ruining her dress and mussing her hair.

Lord Brightman's mother looked down her nose at Elise, who stood almost as tall as she, and asked, "Who are you, and what were you doing spying on the guests in the house."

"I am Elise Halden and I wasn't spying because I was in the tree before my brother and his friend came outside."

Elise watched as Lady Richard rearranged her bodice, and wondered if she should mention the rip in the back. She decided against it. If the woman was this mad and she didn't know about the

tear, imagine how angry she'd be if she did.

“Just what were you doing in that tree, Elise?”

She'd come to the tree to escape the taunts from some of the older girls during the feast, then Michael and Ren had come outside to puff their cheroots and she was trapped aloft. Elise smiled as she remembered the qualities Michael listed when he described the woman he wanted as a wife. The instant she heard them, she knew he was describing *her*, and that they would marry one day because they were perfect for each other. She gathered her ripped skirts and held them in her hands, as she looked up to the limb from which she just fallen to see if she'd left any material behind.

Smiling, she turned to the woman who softened her landing, and replied, “Falling in love, I think.”

CHAPTER ONE

London, May 1822

“Have you heard the news?”

Lady Elise Halden shot her dearest friend in the whole world a stern gaze and tightened her lips. Unable to move for fear the dressmaker’s pins might come out of place, she hoped her friend would catch her expression and hold her tongue. Lady Beverly Hepplewhite’s eyes widened as she continued into Elise’s room and hopped onto her bed.

Elise looked down to the stitchers working on the hem of her gown. “Excuse me,” she said. Holding a rose-colored ribbon in place on her sleeve, she stepped off the stool and addressed her maid and the seamstresses. “Bridget, Madame, will you give us a few minutes please? I’ll ring when I’m ready to continue.”

Adding a straight pin to the ribbon before leaving, Madame Fuichard and her two assistants quit the room. But not her maid, Bridget. She looked directly at Elise and her friend. “You’re due to come out in five days,” said the red-headed maid, just a few years older than Elise. “If you do something foolish now, His Grace’ll banish ye for sure. An’ because I don’t have a fondness for the Grampians in winter, I won’t be going with ye.”

Once the door shut behind her maid, Beverly said, “I was wondering why he didn’t come for breakfast. Now I hear he’s gone to Woodhenge to make arrangements.”

Elise lifted her hands, showing Beverly her inability to hold them steady. “I have never in my life been so nervous as I am now. These horrid butterflies are the result of the entire *ton* believing Michael, *my Michael*, is in need of a bride *now* simply because his uncle has died and he’s ascended to the title.”

“You can’t say it took you by surprise. We all knew this day would come as the old earl has been on his deathbed for the past year,” Beverly quipped. “Heaven knows the new Earl of Camden has a responsibility to all those women in his family. After all, he’s now the only male and will need to see to an heir very soon.”

“His mother and older sister have been pressuring him to take a bride for the past year. Now he *must* wait three months.” Elise sighed. “My heart wants to believe he’s been waiting for me, but my brain says it’s unlikely.”

“I’ve always wondered why the old earl never married,” Beverly said. “Was he... you know, light in the instep?”

Elise shook her head. "Heavens, no! It's not common knowledge, but—" Elise checked to make sure Bridget hadn't come back into the room, and continued, "The old earl had a scandalous marriage many years ago. He'd fallen in love with, and married, a young lady who was unfaithful while he was in India on the Crown's business. She then became with child by her lover. Both mother and babe died in childbirth. And the earl, as you know, never remarried." Elise's mind raced at what she could do now to benefit her cause. "This does not help my chances."

"Michael will be in mourning for three months, Elise," Beverly stated. "He'll not start a bride hunt until after that. *That's* when you need to worry about competition."

"In three months I won't have you here to help me think things through because your Papa will be back any day now. Won't he?" When her friend nodded, Elise sighed, feeling as though the whole world was conspiring against her.

"I won't be moving to Land's End, Elise. I'll only be a few blocks away."

She nodded as she caught her reflection in the mirror. "I had so hoped to win him over gradually during this season. Now I shall have to contend with every mother of a marriageable-age daughter, and the daughters themselves, all pursuing Michael for his new title and wealth." Elise studied the dress pinned onto her with a disapproving eye, and sighed with double frustration. "You would think that Michael being my brother's life-long friend would give me an advantage," she muttered. "He'll likely not wish to be in the same room as me."

She stamped her foot, her complete annoyance giving rise to a flourish of unladylike manners. "Damn his uncle for dying last night!"

Beverly gasped at Elise's invective. "The man couldn't very well plan the time of his departure from this world, Elise."

She sat at her dressing table, her shoulders slumping in dejection. "I'm sorry for my selfish tirade. The old earl really was a dear man." A pin stuck her in the waist and she pulled the offensive thing from the dress.

Beverly nodded, "You know, that dress has turned out better than we originally thought." Her friend eyed it closely. "But, something is still missing." She shook her head. "Perhaps after you have your jewels and your mother's tiara on, it will complete the effect."

Elise contemplated her friend's words. The as-yet unfinished dress she planned to wear Saturday was completely conventional, and the latest fashion among her set. It gave her the appearance of a proper young lady. The lady her brother wanted her to be. She did want to please him—all of them really—and make he, Lia and Grandmother

proud of her on her special night.

The skirt was crushed white silk with rows of narrow rose-colored satin ribbons ringing the skirt up to the knee. The same colored ribbons ringed the puffed white silk sleeves at the edge. The bodice of rose-colored silk ended just below her less than acceptable bust line. It successfully created the desired effect of a more abundant cleavage than God had provided. A wide band of silk rosettes, precisely three shades lighter than the ribbons, intertwined with satin greenery at the hem of the floor-length creation. More of those same rosettes were sewn into the folds of ribbon gathered on the sleeve, and on the same material gathered between her breasts.

Looking at herself in the mirror with a critical eye, she realized that the dress she once adored, she now hated. The exquisite, one of a kind creation from Madame Fuichard made her look just like all the other girls out on the marriage mart this season. She would be unremarkable among the herd of other chits being paraded about by anxious mamas.

"What am I going to do, Beverly? How *ever* will I get him to notice me?" She stamped her foot again. "You more than anyone know I have the worst luck where Michael is concerned. Now to be forced to catch his eye while all the other unmarried ladies out there do likewise.... Why, I could never compare! I am not as pretty as they are."

"You are so," Beverly argued.

Elise cut her off, "Not to mention that he remembers every misdeed and prank I've executed on him since I was ten."

"He doesn't know about Attila," Beverly said with a confident smile.

Elise remembered seeing Michael at Tattersalls that day three years ago and laughed. "No! He doesn't know that was us, and it's best left that way." She began to pull pins from the dress, removing all the rosettes as her imagination began to wander. "I knew Attila was perfect for Michael when I started him under saddle. And I was right, for Michael loves that horse." She smiled as she pulled pins from a ribbon and tossed it onto the table. "To this day, the man has no idea I was the one who trained him."

They were silent a moment as Elise continued removing adornments from the unfinished dress. Their eyes met in the mirror, and Beverly asked, "What are you doing?"

"I've been fretting over this for the last hour." Elise pointed at the pile of rosettes and the ribbon from the hem she'd just pulled. "There is far too much frippery on this dress. It isn't what I normally wear, so why pretend I like it?" Their eyes met in the mirror again. "I need a dress that reflects *me*. The old me *and* the new me. Who I have always

been, and who I am today.”

Beverly's eyes grew wide with excitement. She smiled and nodded. “More important than a just a dress, what you need is to come up with a plan for *making* him take notice of you. Though nothing like you did when you were fifteen. That little act nearly got you killed and it was over a year before Michael returned to Haldenwood.”

“I did *not* nearly get killed. I was barely scratched. And I never would have fallen off that trellis if it wasn't rotted to begin with.” Elise remembered all too well how fabulous Michael looked when stripped to the waist, baring that magnificently muscled chest and back of his. She had stared, mouth agape at the beauty of him. As she felt the vines ripping away from the stone, and the remnants of the ancient trellis crumbling beneath her, her friend screamed, alerting him to her presence as she dangled from his balcony. He'd come running to the rail and looked down just in time to see her land flat on her back in the freshly weeded flower beds below.

“Perhaps it was a little embarrassing for him, but I was duly punished.... after father ascertained I was indeed well and truly alive.” Elise closed her eyes and sighed. “I remember thinking I'd died and gone to heaven.” Meeting her friend's blue-eyed stare, she added, “That was before I fell!”

Beverly threw her arms up and flopped back on the mattress. “You've been falling for him since you were ten. One day I'm afraid you might fall too far and get hurt.” Her friend turned a worried expression to her and said, “you must, I implore you, endeavor to restrain yourself. The consequences are too severe for us now.”

“I shall, I promise, but I need your help devising some way to make him notice the new grown-up me, and not remember the irritating little brat I was.” Elise clasped her hands together in a praying fashion and brought them to her breast. “I so desperately want him to realize that I have waited for him all these years, and I am already his.”

“What we need is a plan,” Beverly said.

“Yes, you've said that.” Elise stared at her short, mousy-brown hair in the mirror, now wishing her hair were longer, her face prettier, her features more feminine, and her nearly non-existent bosom, more full and lush. Anything so he would see her as a beautiful, desirable woman. Michael was so perfect in her eyes that he deserved a charming, ladylike wife. Granted, she could do nothing about her actual looks, but what about her clothes? Could her clothing help portray her in a more desirable light? A tighter fit to the bodice? A dropped waist perhaps?

But more important than her looks and clothing, she understood

it was her behavior that must be tempered. To that end, she vowed to continue to work on that part of her personality. It often felt like a sisyphian task she undertook, with the hope that one day Michael might think her worthy.

After several minutes of complete silence while both girls contemplated the problem, Beverly leaped from the bed, startling Elise. "I've got it! Or, at least, I think I do."

Eyes closed, Beverly paced the long hand-tied Turkey rug, rubbing the bridge of her delicate nose with the thumb and forefinger. "What we want is for Michael to see you for the woman you've become, and not as the girl you were. Right?"

"Yes, of course. You said as much a few minutes ago."

"You know me, Elise, everything has to be mapped out, the goal identified and a plan put into motion to accomplish the task."

"Yes, yes, you have always been the planner. But what have you come up with?" God, she hoped it wasn't too unorthodox. With her brother overseeing every move she made, she'd never get away with anything outrageous. If she even tried, Bridget was right, he'd send her to that box of rocks he used as a hunting lodge up in Scotland for sure.

"You must not only behave differently, but look different as well," she said. "Stand up."

Elise did. Beverly walked around her. "You look just like every other chit at every other ball we've been to this past month."

Elise resisted rolling her eyes. She knew that. Hadn't she just been thinking it all morning? Beverly tugged at Elise's short, straight locks. "Granted, your hair is shorter than the other girls', but it is very much the trend now that you and your sister-in-law started the fashion. Why every woman with a backbone is liberating herself of the nuisance of long hair."

Elise smiled at her best friend. "Yes but my hair just sits there, where your hair is fabulous, curling like it does."

"Elise, this will become a mutual admiration session if we let it. We simply must stay on task."

"Right."

"Now, let's start with this dress. It's all wrong. It's a debutant's dress. What you want is something more... womanly. A sheath of a dress. Something that will maximize what figure you do have with less frills and flounce. Something a tad more daring. Are you following me?"

"I believe I am," Elise whispered, staring at the dress in the oval pier glass. "You're right. That is what has been bothering me since I saw myself in the mirror."

"You need something plain, but not white," Beverly said as she

continued to scrutinize Elise's figure and dress. "No pastels, either. The only people who wear pastels are little girls and wall flowers."

"I don't think my brother will allow me to make my debut in a scarlet peignoir, Beverly." Just because she'd been daring in the past, she had to remember her goal—to become someone Michael would desire. She wanted to be the kind of woman he would be attracted to, and proud to marry.

"No, I shouldn't think he would. But he needn't know what your gown looks like does he? And what about the duchess, or your grandmother? Will either of them be assisting you on Saturday evening?"

"I suppose I could manage with just Bridget."

"Yes you can. Now about your dress...."

After several more minutes of staring into the mirror, Elise and Beverly concluded the current dress just would not do. So they sketched a design for a new dress. A dress that was sure to catch the eye of every man in attendance. Most hopefully, the new Earl of Camden.

"What if we're wrong?" Elise asked. She realized, for the first time, that this feeling of doubt was foreign to her. If the stakes weren't so high, she'd throw caution to the wind and go with her heart. "What if this backfires? This is my entire future we're placing in the hands of a modiste."

"This will work, Elise. There is nothing in this design that is unorthodox. The dress is not immodest in any way. It is simply... simple. Which allows *you* to shine as the jewel you are. *This*," her friend pointed at their sketch, "Lord Camden, will appreciate. I promise you."

Elise pulled her bell cord and Bridget, Madame Fuichard and the seamstresses returned. Elise showed Madame the sketch and asked if it could be ready by Saturday afternoon, five days away. Madame looked about to faint, declaring the task impossible in the few days before her big ball.

"This is a not a dress fit for a young mademoiselle making her debut to the world. This.... This 'creation' is perhaps something fit for a married woman wishing to court scandal."

"My lady," Bridget stated, "One look at ye, when you come down to dinner in that, and they'll be sending you right back up here to change into another gown." The servant shook her red curls while she studied the drawing. "Ye won't get away with it, I tell you."

Then it hit her. Why not two dresses?

She took Beverly aside and asked, "What do you think about changing gowns? I mean to have one for dinner and another for the ball."

“Well,” Beverly mused, “as I see it, your biggest obstacle is your maid. We can’t have her leaking our secret. Then, all we need to do is calculate the time it would take to come upstairs after dinner, change, then reappear in the receiving line. We cannot do it without Bridget’s help.”

Elise nodded then turned back to the modiste. “Could you do both?”

The modiste looked from Bridget to Elise. “There simply is not enough time to find the material and sew another new dress.”

Not about to let her plan be defeated, Elise gave a winsome smile to Madame Fuichard, then added, “I have enormous faith in you and your assistants, Madame. But, if you don’t think you can do it, would you be upset if I ask Madame Robillard if she could squeeze me into her busy schedule?”

Madame closed her eyes tapped her pencil on the dresser. Elise could sense the other woman’s agitation with her. “I shall pay you handsomely Madame, if you could make this dress also. I truly do not wish to go to another modiste.”

“If I do it,” the other woman said with some reservation. “I will need to hire two more seamstresses to have just your two orders completed in time.” The modiste studied the sketch closely, saying, “The dress appears simple and easy to make, and we already have your measurements. We would need the fabric selection.”

Elise clapped her hands together and grinned. “Wonderful! We shall go shopping for new fabric this very minute. Unless Madame has something suitable for this design, in a color to complement my complexion already in her shop?”

The woman returned Elise’s smile, either because of the opportunity to double her fee, or because she instinctively loved the idea of being known as dressmaker to this sister of a duke. “It just so happens I received a bolt in my latest shipment from the east. In fact, it is so newly arrived I have not even cut into it. It is a dark ivory silk, the color will be a perfect highlight for your hair, skin and eyes, and because you are so willowy and graceful, you will carry this masterpiece with exceptional flair. There will be none to match you on this night or the rest of the season, Mademoiselle.”

“I wish to purchase the entire bolt, as I trust your judgment completely, Madame. Now, if you could create this dress,” she held up the sheet of heavy vellum, “for me *alone*, you will have my gratitude, as well as exclusivity as my dressmaker for the rest of the season.”

This seemed to please Madame immensely, and she assured Elise she would have both dresses for her to try on in two days.

Later, as the women gathered their belongings to leave the chamber, Elise reminded them of the need for secrecy. The last thing

she needed was her brother getting wind of her intention and somehow foiling her plan.

Once she closed the door behind them, she turned to her friend and said, "That went very well, don't you think?"

Beverly smiled and nodded. "I do. Michael will hardly be able to dismiss you once you appear on the landing wearing that dress. His eyes will be riveted on you the entire night."

Early Saturday morning, hoping to avoid the amazingly organized chaos that was the preparations for her ball, Elise and Beverly headed out the front door after breakfast, prepared to go for their usual ride in the park. Unlike other young ladies, Elise and Beverly actually rode to enjoy their horses, not to be seen.

"Thank you, Niles," Elise said, as the butler held the door open.

"Yes, thank you, Niles," Beverly added right behind her.

"It would not be remiss of me to remind you ladies of the evening ahead."

"How *can* I forget, dear Niles," Elise replied, "My stomach is roiling because of nerves as it is. I'm hoping this ride will calm them so I can eat something before tonight."

Niles watched over the ladies as they waited for the grooms to come up with their horses. But before the grooms arrived, a familiar dark green carriage bearing the gold-inlaid Camden crest pulled in front of the Upper Brook street home of the Duke of Caversham. A groom hopped down, opened the door and lowered the steps, and out stepped the man Elise had fantasized about since she was ten years old. At that time, her papa had just married Amelia and her brother was away at school. Often when her brother returned home he had Michael in tow, and that's was how she became acquainted with him. But it was the evening of her father's wedding celebration that she fell in love with him. As soon as she realized she wanted to marry him, Elise did what any little girl would do to force an unwilling young man to come up to scratch—she held his horse hostage by hiding it in another barn until he agreed to marry her.

Michael removed his hat as he ascended the steps. His cocoa brown hair was slicked back as though he was fresh from a bath. Those familiar greenish-brown eyes, set wide on his face under a strong brow, held an amused twinkle this morning. The grin turning the corners of his well-formed wide lips upward was most contagious. Elise's fingers just itched to trace his fine features, including the faint cleft in his chin. Even though he had a tiny 'v' shaped scar on his cheek from some childhood accident, he looked too devastatingly handsome for his own good.

And it bothered Elise that he knew she thought him handsome.

Though she hadn't told him so recently, she *had* told him just that in the past. She remembered the day many years earlier, when she'd gone into the barn to find an angry Michael waiting on his horse. She told him he was too handsome to go through life scowling. He said nothing to her, just mumbled at her as he took his horse's reins and left.

Today he smiled. Which irritated *her*. Though in his favor, everything was irritating her on this day, and knew she really needed to temper her thoughts before getting on her horse. The excitable little mare was doing well, and Elise really didn't want to end up on the ground because she couldn't control her own emotions.

Michael's light gray fine wool coat bore a black velvet mourning arm band to match the collar. The fabric stretched across his shoulders as though it was pasted onto his broad back. A silver satin waistcoat adorned with onyx buttons hugged his trim waist. Her breathing stilled as she could almost imagine him unbuttoning them, to relax over a game of cards or chess. What she wouldn't give to have him relax in such a manner with her.

Even in mourning, this man looked every bit the handsome rogue. His buff-yellow nankeen breeches looked as though his well-muscled thighs were poured into them, without a wrinkle in sight. She surmised that his fine boots probably took his valet hours to polish to their mirror shine.

She tried—really, really tried—to appear bored and disinterested in his presence, even so far as feigning interest in the traffic on the street. Elise knew she more than likely was not succeeding.

He came up and greeted them. His smile warm and genuine.

Beverly curtsied and said, "Good morning, Lord Camden."

"Yes," Elise said when she turned to face him, bobbing a quick curtsy. "Good morning, my lord." She immediately turned away, as though staring down the street would bring the grooms out of the mews faster.

He nodded to them. "It is turning into a beautiful day, ladies," Michael replied. "I'd begun to despair after waking to a fog so thick I was unable to see across my garden." He came to stand beside them, and asked, "Out for a ride on this fine morning?"

His proximity made her more nervous, causing her heart to beat faster. Elise's naturally sarcastic tongue blurted out the first thing that came to her head. "No. We just thought we'd watch the traffic pass by in our best riding habits."

Beverly elbowed her and shot her a warning glare. Turning her full smile back to Michael, she said, "You must forgive her, my lord. Tonight's festivities have left my friend on tenterhooks and those she loves most have been the recipients of her stinging retorts all morning.

I am hoping this outing will bring back the sweet disposition I know Elise to have.”

Elise just stared, slack-jawed at the excuses for *her* behavior pouring from her friend’s mouth. She wished it were possible to kick herself for those words—once for thinking them, and once for saying them. Why, oh why, did she always turn her sarcastic tongue on the only man she wanted to impress with her changed ways?

“Yes,” Michael replied, giving her a sympathetic smile. “Let’s hope this ride rids Lady Elise of her nerves before the evening’s big event.” Turning to Elise, he smiled. “Just remember to breathe deeply and relax. All will turn out well.”

“Easy for you to say. It’s not *your* debut!” She did it again, snapped at him when she wanted to entice him. She wanted him to see the new Elise. Why was it so difficult to change? She’d never win him over if she didn’t.

“You’re right, it’s not. But I’m trying to help here, Elise.”

“You can’t help, when you’re part of the problem.” Immediately she slapped her hand over her mouth, embarrassed by her words. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said.... Oh, dear.” She felt her body tremble and her eyes well with burning tears. She swallowed the lump that rose and words of apology rushed out of her. “I’m sorry, my lord. You would think because of all the preparations we made last year, that I would not be so nervous now. But, since the start of the season, I have felt somewhat left out, attending everyone else’s ball when I hadn’t had my own yet.”

Michael nodded his head. “If I could I would offer to dance with you, but as you know....”

“Yes, I know,” Elise said. “Your family is in mourning.”

“But if I were not, I would love a dance.”

He appeared sincere, and not in his normal teasing manner. Elise wondered if he were feeling well because he was usually ripe to pick on her when she was in a snit like a moment ago. Not letting this new, compassionate mood of his slip by she said, “I will hold you to that, my lord.”

He nodded. “Absolutely do, We can even make it a waltz if you have permission.”

“Of course I have permission,” she said. But the sarcastic tone with which she’d begun her reply quickly died. “We got it last year just before.... Um, before we....” Elise stopped, remembering that day the family had planned to leave for London and last year’s season. Grandmother had taken a tumble down the main stairs, striking her head, knocking her unconscious. For almost a week they held vigil over her, hoping she would awaken. Their prayers were answered when one afternoon she opened her eyes, thus beginning her long

recovery. As a result Elise missed her first season.

"That's right," he said quickly. "Grandmother was recovering."

Elise nodded, unable to speak as she was still ashamed at her outburst. And now she had the added emotion of remembering the pain at nearly losing her grandmother.

"All is well now," Michael said with a smile. "Lady Sewell is in prime form, ready to take on the Season with you and your family." He winked at her, causing her to return his smile. "I know the season will be over by then, but in three months we can have our waltz."

The three of them watched as the grooms led the horses forward—mares for Elise and Beverly, and a quiet gelding for the groom following as guard. Michael tipped his head and bid them a delightful ride.

Once mounted and away from the house and the groom, Beverly turned her curly blond head to Elise, her eyes reproachful. "That was better. You started off sounding shrewish, but recovered when he mentioned the family foregoing the season last year."

The mares walked on a relaxed rein toward the park entrance. "Remembering grandmother's accident brought back the fear and emotions from those weeks when we didn't know if she would survive. It still causes me upset."

"Or were you tongue-tied because you were surprised to find Michael being polite to you?" Beverly turned to look at her. They rode through the park's gated entrance, and her friend added, "Remember, you must give him a reason to want to be in your presence, or else all is lost."

"I know you are right. Over and over in my head I go through every scenario possible with him and plan how I would comport myself in that situation. Inevitably, I never do what I rehearsed and my sarcastic mouth just takes over." It was times like this when Elise thought she would drown in her despair.

"Do you remember what Mrs. Pritchard taught us to do in those situations?"

Elise shook her head. With her brain in the barn her entire life, Elise never paid much attention to their comportment teacher. Which was why she was in this predicament in the first place.

Beverly went on. "She said to close our eyes and count to three before we reply. First, you'll appear more intelligent—as though you'd thought your answer through before replying. Second, it will make you appear less like a bounding colt and more the refined lady you should be. And isn't that what we all struggle to portray? Images of serene, intelligent ladies?"

"Not everyone," Elise replied. "I certainly don't see those Corrigan girls attempting to appear more intelligent, and look at all

the bucks circling them each night!”

“We should be so lucky.”

Elise nodded and they both laughed as they followed the bridle path, keeping their horses at a walk, preferring to wait until they reached the far side of the Serpentine to race—away from the prying eyes and condemning glances of the others taking in the morning sunshine. But Elise’s mind wasn’t on the lovely morning, or even the Corrigan girls and all their many beau.

“I cannot believe he said he would actually waltz with me when he comes out of mourning.” She looked over at her friend and smiled. “I now have three months to perfect my dance.”

Elise sighed. She had to change. She had to temper her thoughts, her words, and her actions. It was the only way for anyone to really believe she was different. That she had grown up. Or, as Beverly said, all would be lost, because the new Lord Camden would just marry someone else.

With a slight flick of the wrist, she gave a light tap of her crop behind the girth of her off-side, which sent her mare bounding forward, leaving her friend and her groom staring at her back.

Michael Brightman, the new twelfth Earl of Camden, strode into the dining room at Caversham House, an unusual cheer rising within. Likely because it was a weekend, and there was nothing needing his attention until Monday morning. It definitely didn’t have anything to do with seeing the little hellion out front. The fact that she was nervous about the night ahead told him she at least cared enough to present herself in a manner that would make her family proud. Could it be she was growing up?

The little hellion, all grown up. Shocking thought that. Hopefully it meant no more romantic interest in him. He stumbled over the edge of a folded carpet, and caught himself on the door jamb.

Michael laughed at his clumsiness, then smiled and greeted Ren and Lia, as he did most mornings when they were all in Town.

“Good morning Your Grace,” he said to the duchess, “you are looking radiantly beautiful as usual.”

“I’m sorry about all the disarray, my lord,” the Duchess of Caversham replied. “I have been assured all the carpets and boxes from the decorations will be out of the hallway before the festivities begin this evening.”

He turned to his old friend and said, “And you look... just as you always do these days, like you want to strangle someone.” Michael proceeded to pile a plate high with eggs, kippers, and bacon, then took a seat across from the duchess and next to Ren. “So, who is it you want to kill this time?”

“My sister perhaps? She’s been pain in my backside this past week.”

“Leave her be, husband,” the duchess warned. “Her behavior is to be expected considering tonight is *her* ball. Since the season began, we’ve attended everyone else’s parties. Tonight is *her* night.”

Michael knew what a strong-willed chit Elise could be when her mind was set on something, so he had to sympathize with his friend on this. Except she was off this morning. Like a slightly lame horse, where you can’t tell exactly where the thing is bothered, she was just... off.

“She was looking rather piqued just now,” Michael commented. “Hopefully an invigorating ride will settle her.” He swallowed a mouthful of food. “You can tell she’s nervous. She’s snapping like a shrew, and.... Wait, she’s always like that.” He winked at Ren. Michael actually found the whole discourse refreshing. Elise’s discomposure, while not something he’d laugh at, was out of the ordinary for her. So the stress of the night’s festivities was starting to wear on her. At least he was able to calm her before she mounted the mare. He’d hate to see her injured or worse because she wasn’t paying attention while riding her horse. Elise didn’t ride tractable, quiet horses. No. She trained as she rode, so she rode horses that would be problems for most riders.

But the good thing about tonight was Elise was now on the marriage mart. Soon she would be locked away in the country at some poor fop’s estate, bearing offspring to continue that man’s lineage.

He remembered his mother’s departing words yesterday, and it only served to pressure him to fulfill his duty now that he had the title. He was, after all, the last male in a family of eleven women. She reminded him of the fact that the title would not just go into abeyance, it would, in fact die with him if he didn’t see to finding a wife and begetting his own heirs.

Still, Michael smiled. Lucky for him he had a three month reprieve to mourn his uncle before starting his search for a suitable bride. He wondered if this paragon of ladylike virtue, if she even existed, would mind if he continued his tradition of breakfast with his friends before work.

“Like I said before,” Ren replied, “I can’t wait to hand her off to some unsuspecting chap and get her out of my hair. She’s put more gray on my head this past year than I ever gave our father.”

“Husband!” Her Grace chided.

“Oh, you don’t mean that and you know it,” Michael said with confidence. “The gray hairs part might be true, but handing her off to some young, dunder-headed prig? That’s not what she needs. Elise requires someone who will appreciate her spirit and charm.” He lifted

a forkful of egg to his mouth. "Not some spineless ninny or worse someone who will break her to his will like a horse to saddle."

Where did *that* come from? Why was he defending Elise? Looking out for her well-being? The disconcerting, gnawing feeling he'd experienced just now struck a chord in him. An irritating one, at that. He was not going to feel sorry for the girl. She sat a horse better than he, and was almost as good a shot with a pistol as he. Why, she was probably even a decent card and billiard player as well. He already knew she played a fair game of chess and backgammon.

She was a sporting lady. Not one of those simpering women one was compelled to feel sorry for. The chit was, and always had been, a nuisance—fancying herself in love with him since she could string a sentence together. So numerous were the times she had placed herself in his path either to annoy him or, as she grew older hoping to catch his eye, that he could not count. Though in all honesty she hadn't done so in several years. At least not since her grandmother had moved in with them and Ren married. Her grandmother, her brother's wife, and her house guest, Lady Beverly Hepplewhite, all seemed to be very good influences on Elise. And Michael had to admit he hadn't seen much of her since she started on this horse project of hers.

Yes, she would make some horse-mad fop a decent enough wife. And with a dowry as ample as hers, she'd be betrothed before the season ended.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were talking about yourself," Ren stated, matter-of-factly as he met Michael's gaze over the rim of his coffee cup. "But we do know better, don't we?"

Michael turned his attention to the egg and sausage on his plate, determined to explore this peculiar feeling later. "Most certainly, Your Grace. I don't need any added troubles under my roof. Have enough as it is, what with my mother and now my sisters pushing all these women at me—everything from barely-out-of-the-schoolroom misses to widows older than I." He shook his head for emphasis. "I certainly don't need your hellion sister sharpening her claws on my fair heart." He sipped his coffee, and looked up into the sympathetic face of the duke. "No, my friend, the safe route's the one for me."

"Ha! That'll be the day, you rascalion." Everyone turned to the doorway when a silver-turbaned Lady Sewell entered the room leaning on her cane. Michael and Ren stood as the duke's elderly grandmother came to take her usual seat to Michael's left.

"Good morning, my lady," Michael said as he placed a kiss on the older woman's wrinkled cheek, and assisted her to her chair. A footman brought her a plate with her usual breakfast, then cut her ladyship's ham steak for her, and stepped back from the table.

"Camden, when your three months mourning are over you had

best have a future wife in mind.”

“I thought I’d marry you, darling,” Michael said. “After all, we get along smashingly and I’ve never had a whist partner as sharp as you.”

“If I could give you the heir you need, I’d take you up on it.” The woman’s blue-gray eyes sparkled with mischief as she forked a fluffy piece of egg.

“If it wasn’t considered bad form, you would have every one of my dances tonight, my lady.” Michael said, as he realized their conversation was causing his friend to squirm in his seat.

“I told Elise last night that if I were a young miss again I’d not settle for anything less than a man who’s kiss made my lady parts quiver and my brain turn to mush.” His Grace choked on his coffee, as his duchess serenely scooped the yolk from her egg cup as though the ribald dialogue was a normal occurrence. “Ah Camden.... If I were a few years younger, I’d make you my third husband.”

The servants would later say amongst themselves that they all heard His Grace choke on the mouthful of food he’d been about to swallow. A footman stood poised to run for the family physician in case his presence became necessary—which, thankfully, was not.

≈ ≈ ≈

Already His is available now on [Amazon](#).

Enjoy a sneak peek from the newest book in the series.
The Caversham Chronicles—Book Three

LOVING SARAH
Sandy Raven



The Caversham Chronicles continue with Book Three, ***Loving Sarah***, the story of Ren and Elise's adventurous younger sister Sarah on her path to a Happily Ever After.

Coming, Summer 2013

CHAPTER ONE

Liverpool, June 1835

“What about her? She looks fast doesn’t she?”

“Hmmm... *Aurelia*,” Ian Alexander Ross, grandson of the Earl of Mackeever, mused as he strolled alongside his friend Lucky Gualtiero, brother of Lia, the Duchess of Caversham. “She may look fast, but she’s not built the way I like. Something about her shape... too curvy if you ask me. It looks like she might fall apart before the ordeal is over.”

“What about that one? *Evangeline*,” his tanned, olive-skinned friend asked.

Ian turned his gaze to where Lucky motioned. “Too top heavy, and her bottom’s too narrow to support her. She’ll tip over in a stiff wind.”

“What about that one?”

“Her bottom’s too broad. She’ll be too slow to tack.”

“Well, you can’t say the same about that one over there. She has a nice, well-proportioned hull. At least what I can see of it.”

He didn’t need to consider the vessel in question, for he knew her design well. He should, it was very similar to, if not exactly, a design of his father’s. “Yes. Nice curves, sturdily built, and I think I know her owner. If it is who I think, he has a load of money, but no skill at the wheel.” He gazed at *Ann McKim* longingly. “She was launched two years ago from the very yard my father helped found and has already broken records for fastest crossing times for the Atlantic and Pacific in both directions. But a ship like that could do far better with the right man at the wheel.” Sighing, he turned to Lucky. “What that lady needs is a man with a knowledgeable, soft hand and the experience to coax her on when she wants to give up.”

“So, do you think we stand a chance?” Lucky stopped and turned toward him.

Ian looked over the competition once more, and nodded. “Oh, I’d say the odds are very good. Next to McKim’s lady out there, we’ve definitely got the best boats in this race. A little smaller, a little aged, but well broken in. More importantly, both of them are lovingly maintained and handled.” They walked away from the dock and the preparations for the next day’s ceremony. “I believe everything is ready for the morning. God willing, we’ll have good wind.”

“The weather will hold until we’re well out,” Lucky said as he scanned the sky and horizon around them. Ian didn’t question him. He

knew better. Like an old sailor, Lucky had an instinct for forecasting weather just by looking at the clouds. "Remember, my sister's throwing us a dinner party to see us off. Be at the house around seven."

"I'll be there. You know I wouldn't miss an opportunity for real food. Anything is better than the grub Mick throws into a kettle," Ian said as they neared a waiting hackney.

"You need to find a better cook," Lucky replied. "So you stop trying to take mine away."

The driver tipped his hat and opened the door for the men. "You go on without me. I'm just going to get cleaned up, make sure the watch is in place, and I'll be right behind you."

"Fine." Lucky gave a quick nod to the man holding the door, then asked Ian if he needed the address again. Ian shook his head, and asked the hackney driver to simply return for him after dropping off Lucky. "Then I'll see you soon."

The hackney door closed on his friend. After the driver cued the horse to move on, Ian turned back to the dinghy tied below, and rowed out to the *Revenge*, his best hope for victory in this race. Their supplies had been loaded earlier in the day, so he'd moved his boat away from the hustle and bustle of the dock. And any potential sabotage. Not that he suspected his fellow competitors of such underhanded behavior, but one could never be too careful when the stakes were this high. Tying off the dinghy, he climbed onto the deck and double-checked to make sure all was in readiness for the start of the race.

Normally, he wouldn't have even considered wasting their time entering a race, but the twenty-five thousand pound purse was far too large to ignore. More importantly, if he and Lucky were serious about succeeding in their joint venture, the newly chartered British Tea Import Company, they needed more ships. Two retrofit Baltimore schooners, though a respectable beginning, wouldn't turn the kind of profits necessary to expand their business in the manner they wanted. The one tea run they'd made last year left him with barely enough to live on after paying the note—a full half of what they'd borrowed—and their crews' salaries. Lucky might not need the money as much as he did, but he'd be damned if he'd let his partner pay their way until they could turn a profit. Lucky had done enough already by paying the shipyard bill for the retrofit of the two boats over the past winter.

His dream, and Lucky's too, was to have a fleet of at least a dozen clippers, preferably designed and built to their specifications. After carefully studying Colonel Beaufoy's publication, *Nautical and Hydraulic Experiments*, where Beaufoy tested and found Newton's hydraulics theory unlikely, Ian had begun drawing his own hull

designs. In order to maximize hull space for valuable cargo, Ian's idea was first to streamline the design of the hull; next to make her longer and deeper in the keel; then, thirdly, to eliminate the complete dependence on ballast and use lead plate on the keel in conjunction with minimal internal ballast for stabilization. He was excited and anxious to test his theory. If it worked, he knew it would forever change the way hulls were designed and built. And his father, wherever his soul rested, would be proud.

Having grown up with a naval architect for a father, a man who designed clipper hulls and constructed them, Ian knew that shipyards in New York and Baltimore were more willing to build experimental designs; whereas in Aberdeen and Halifax, they were more likely to insist the time-tested and proven designs they have been very successful building for the last twenty years were better. Ian knew his design held promise, and so did his partner. But, he would amuse Lucky and have the Aberdeen yards look at the designs, but Ian knew they would likely have to go back to America to have them built.

Ian made his way down to his small cabin, stopping to take a bucket of fresh water from the barrel near the companionway. He ladled some into the metal basin, set the bucket down near the washstand, then stripped. He dunked his head into the bowl and began washing. One day, he'd like to have a house with a proper bathing chamber. There would be no more tossing water out of the aft windows and refilling wash basins. No more bathing with cold water except when at sea. Worst of all were the times he had to bathe with salt water, because it always left him feeling sticky and itchy. For that reason, he understood why some of the crew went without baths during those times.

Life at sea wasn't the romantic, adventurous dream he'd imagined. But, this had been his reality for the past three years since leaving university. He supposed he could have lived on credit and taken rooms somewhere, as did others in his financial situation. But Ian was too American for that, as Lucky reminded him on those rare occasions he complained out loud. He might be the nephew of the current Earl of Mackeever, but he was still the American-born son of a Baltimore naval architect who designed ships for the Americans in their war for independence. A fact not lost to most of his classmates. Except for Lucky, who was as much of an outsider because of his foreign title and swarthy appearance as he for his American blood at a time when most still remembered their deceased loved ones. In that atmosphere, he and Lucky had become fast friends; then immediately after university, business partners.

Now, at age twenty-five, Ian had the entire world before him. And no place to call home except this ship.

Opening the cabinet, he remembered the cedar lining still needed replacing as he took out his good clothing. Repairs inside his cabin had been low in priority during the renovations, but now as he looked over his best trousers to make sure they weren't moth-eaten or torn somewhere, he decided it needed to get moved up on the list. He checked the coat and linen shirt also for tiny holes, saw none and smiled. Lifting the only waistcoat he owned, he noticed the stitching at the edge of the wool where it met the satin was coming apart, but knew it would remain hidden by the coat if he kept it on.

If he ever planned to take his place in society, he would need to pay more attention to his dress. Ian owed it to his father's sisters not to be an embarrassment when he did. Especially after all they've done for him over the years, from taking him in when his father sent him over for a formal education to sponsoring his entrée into society. Events like this dinner with Lucky's family were sure to become more common as they became more successful. He had to get over the gnawing hatred of his two uncles, and think of tonight as an opportunity to polish his manners, and become more accustomed with the world he'd not been born to, but found himself in now. To do so would make those little old ladies proud.

Lady Sarah Eileen Halden dropped her gaze as her brothers discussed the upcoming race, lest they see the delight in her eyes while her final plan started to form. The rented home in Liverpool the family had taken for the next several months was nowhere near as large or opulent as Caversham House or Haldenwood, but it had something that would serve her well this night, as she'd spied it right after arriving and looking over her temporary bedroom. She had a balcony, that was a mere ten or twelve feet above ground. Sarah could quite easily climb over the railing and ease herself down. The drop, after lowering herself as much as possible, wouldn't be much more than the jump from her favorite tree at home.

She saw it as a sign that she was meant to go with Lucky on this race.

"Ian and I have gone over the charts several times, and already plotted our course." Lucky pointed to something on the map Sarah's brother Ren, the Duke of Caversham, had spread across the table in the drawing room where they all gathered while waiting for the last of their dinner guests to arrive. "Both crews have been with us since last year. They made the tea run with us, and they're all veteran sailors. Most have crossed the Atlantic at least once, some several times. So we're very confident in everyone's abilities."

"Good," her brother, Ren, said, "I know this is an exciting challenge for you, but remember do not push your boat any harder

than she can handle. Even if you don't win this race, you know I'll finance you."

"I appreciate your offer, Ren, truly. But this is something I want to do on my own, and Ian feels the same."

Just then, the butler announced the arrival of Ian Alexander Ross, Lucky's business partner and long-time friend. When Sarah looked up and met his eyes, she could have sworn her heart skipped several beats and her mouth went dry. His brown-eyed gaze met hers and she quickly turned away and took a sip of her sweet wine.

It had been over a year since she'd last seen him., the night he'd come for dinner at Caversham House before leaving on their trip to China. She remembered it was right as the season was getting underway, and she'd thought it was a shame he wouldn't be around to amuse her and her friends. After all, he was certainly handsome enough then. But now he was Adonis come to life. The last year seemed to have matured him even more. He'd become broader in the shoulders and his face bore a healthy sun-kissed glow. His dark blond hair was liberally streaked with gold in a manner that could only have come from working out in the sunshine on the open sea, like hers had when she was a girl sailing her little sloop around the pond, pretending she was a great explorer.

Rugged and handsome. Those were the only words she could think of as she glanced at him again. Without a doubt his viking god-like looks caused tiny tremors to course through her body when she just looked at him. She felt perhaps, if given time together, there would certainly be a curious plethora of emotions and feelings to discover.

Sarah had to stop thinking of him this way. As attractive as the man was, she had no time for flirtation. She had a race to sail with Lucky.

From her position, half-turned from him, she covertly watched him greet some of the other guests as he slowly made his way toward where she stood with her brother Ren, and her brother-by-marriage Lucky. As he did, she noticed his evening wear was somewhat outdated, but it did nothing to detract from his intense vitality. Before she embarrassed herself, she took her leave from her Ren and Lucky and sought her sister-in-law's company as she sat with a group of ladies, including her sister Elise.

Talk among the women soon turned to the goings on in town now that the season was almost over. Lady Vance smiled and shared some of the interesting events they'd attended over the past months. "My girls are still in town with their aunt," she said, "and they were loathe to leave. Now that my two nieces are married, my sister is relishing taking my elder daughter through the season's events."

Sarah traveled in a different set than Miss Vance, the younger girl's friends being more the blue-stocking type. Just the same, she smiled politely, remembering how exciting that first season had been for her as well. She'd truly enjoyed her first and even her second season. Then her friends began to marry, leaving her to start their own families. And with each successive year her tolerance for the superficiality that was the season grew thinner. In her head and heart she was always elsewhere. Her friends knew it, and the men she'd met sensed it. Which is why she was twenty one and still unwed, without a prospect on the horizon.

Sarah had long grown bored with what was her lot in life. She craved adventure. Needed to see the world. Growing up, she'd always questioned why it was that men were respected when they successfully ventured outside the boundaries set for them by society, but never women. Why was a woman's reputation in tatters when she did something bold and adventurous, and not a man's?

The year before she'd thought to stowaway with Lucky to China, but was afraid. That fear was the only thing keeping her inside her comfy, gilded cage—the fear of not being accepted after she'd gone to seek her grand adventure. But not this year.

With only a few weeks until the end of this—her fourth—season, Sarah was beginning to feel her fate might lie in spinsterhood because of these ideas. She knew she was choosy, but wasn't about to compromise in her requirements for a husband. Not only did he have to desire adventure as much as she, his kiss should leave her weak in the knees and curl her toes—something her friends told her was how they knew their husbands were the ones for them.

So, unless and until she found that man, she wouldn't consider marriage. She'd rather remain the eccentric relative to her family. Because she would never compromise those two requirements.

Her decision made to take this chance for adventure, she would turn her back on caution and grasp this one opportunity for adventure. And worry about what might happen upon her return tomorrow.

"You're quiet little sister," her sister Elise said as she sidled up to Sarah, who stood on the fringe of the group of ladies. "You have a wistful look about you. What are thinking about?"

"Wondering why I couldn't have been born a male. I envy Lucky."

Elise stifled a giggle. "You would have made a very effeminate male, and not very attractive to the ladies I dare say."

Sarah shrugged. "You know what I mean. I have to return to London after they start their race, and finish out the season. And I'll do so, wishing the entire time I was racing with them."

"As ladies our rewards are in the home—in caring for our

families, friends and neighbors. Our legacy is the children we raise to carry on after we're gone. I never thought of it that way until after I had Charlotte and needed to be a role model for her." Her sister turned her gaze to her, and seemed to study Sarah's face. "I think next season we should concentrate more intently on finding you a match. A man is what you need now that the social season holds no more charm for you. A family will settle that adventurous spirit of yours."

The dinner bell rang and all the guests proceeded into the dining room, taking their seats. Sarah discovered her dinner companion to her right was Lucky's partner, Mr. Ross. At first, having the handsome, seafaring adventurer beside her caused her pulse to race. But it wasn't long before she knew it wasn't that he'd sailed around the globe, but the man himself who stirred her senses.

The faint scent of cedar and citrus wafted from his direction and she inhaled a shaky breath before looking his way. She smiled.

"So Mr. Ross, you must be excited. Lucky was when we spoke just before your arrival. And it must feel good to return to your home. Even if it is for only a day."

"I wish I had time to visit Baltimore but, in all honesty, there is no reason for me to return there yet."

"Oh. Then you plan to eventually?"

"If we win this race, I will likely return to have my father's friend build our two new clippers. There is no finer shipyard on the eastern seaboard."

"You could have your ships build here. I'm sure His Grace can make the necessary introductions in Aberdeen. It's where his import company was based before he bought out his cousins and moved operations to London. I'm certain we have relatives that likely know a shipbuilder or two."

"That was one of the places we intended to query about building custom clippers."

Footmen began serving the soup and Sarah listened as the men continued their pre-dinner discourse on the opportunities for trade and import now that the East India Company had lost its monopoly as sole importers of tea to Britain. Talk of finance, trade, and the importance of diversification floated about the table. Much to her surprise, some of the women participated as well.

But not Sarah. Her breast quivered under her skin in the presence of Lucky's partner. Or was it the excitement of the race? She was unsure. She pushed her fork around the plate as she listened to their conversation, trying to hide her anticipation. Sarah wasn't quite sure if her titillation came from her plan to stow aboard Lucky's clipper, or her close proximity to this man who had a strange effect on her senses. Because of this, she tried to make certain not to bump her arm

into his, especially when she noted he was left-handed. But when she dropped her napkin, she bumped his arm, causing him to spill the spoonful of soup on his cravat and waistcoat. When she lifted her head, she turned her gaze to his and was mortified, but at the same time wanted to drown in his gold-flecked brown eyes. Or lick the warm, creamy onion soup from his chest.

Where had that thought come from?

"I'm so sorry. I...." Her face burned at the images racing through her head, and the entirety of the table staring their way. She immediately took her napkin and began to dab at his waistcoat, until the footman hurried over to take care of it for her with a clean damp linen. Mr. Ross waved the man away, blotting what little remained of the soup on his waistcoat.

"There wasn't much soup left, as I was nearly done." He showed her the bowl. "See? All is well, my lady," he said through a smile. "No harm done."

"Thank goodness," she whispered, "I'm not normally so clumsy, and I sincerely apologize."

Conversation resumed around them, when Mr. Ross asked her, "Where you going to come out to the dockyards in the morning and watch the ships jockey for position at the starting line?"

Sarah kept her eyes cast downward, unwilling to have him see her excitement as she spooned her soup. She took a deep breath to collect her emotion, and replied, "Yes, Mr. Ross. I wouldn't miss that for the world."

Her dinner partner was turning out to be very charming for an American. She had to admit her earlier perception of him as cocksure and bit self-absorbed was wrong. He was gracious to everyone with whom he spoke.

"Your brother said you are very much alike in that you are as adventuresome as he."

Sarah sighed, again regretting her gender. "Lucky is right. One would think we were true brother and sister, rather than joined by the marriage of our siblings."

"I'm fortunate to have your brother as a friend and partner. I've never met a more honest, intelligent and unprejudiced man before. I consider myself honored to call him friend."

Sarah smiled as she held another spoonful of the hearty onion broth in mid-air. "He can also be annoying and stubborn, but that's coming from a sisterly perspective."

"I never had a sibling to annoy, or I'm sure I would have been the same."

"Don't say so! It would ruin my image of you," she teased.

"Oh?" Mr. Ross laughed, the sound warm and pleasing to her

ears. "What image is that?"

"One of a kind gentleman who is understanding, and not as rigid and straight-laced as my older brother and Lucky."

The next course was served, and the topic changed to the two schooners, *Revenge* and *Avenger*, and the remodeling done to the sister ships. Lucky and Ian were obviously proud of the modifications made to their boats, and felt they stood a solid chance of winning after sizing up most of their competition earlier that afternoon.

"On first glance," Lucky said, "the *Ann McKim* looks to be the best boat in the race, but looks can be deceiving. She's long and sleek all right. But without knowing how she carries her ballast, or the type of keel she has, there's really no knowing how well she'll do. She's a brand new design, built in Baltimore, at Ian's father's very shipyard and while the American owner will captain her, my opinion is he doesn't have half the experience necessary for an undertaking such as this."

An uneasy quiet came over the table, when everyone realized that in an endeavor such as this, not everyone survived. "Unfortunately," Ren said, "there will be lives lost during this race. But I have every confidence in the two of you. In fact, were I twenty years younger, I might have entered myself. Not for the purse so much as the thrill of the adventure."

Sarah pushed the vegetables around on the plate and kept her eyes downcast, for that was the very reason she planned to stow away aboard Lucky's boat.

Sarah shoved the packed canvas bag she'd brought with her from London under her bed. She was going to be on that boat when it sailed in the morning. There was no way she was going to allow Lucky to have this adventure without her. She was tired of reading about everyone else's voyages and missing out on the ones right before her!

She'd spent the last five years the embodiment of a well-mannered young lady because that was what was expected of her, the sister of a duke. And, for the past four seasons, she'd smiled and swallowed her envy as Lucky lived the adventures of which she could only dream. First he and his partner sailed to America to buy the two American-made schooners they required for their newly chartered import company. Then last spring she forced herself to feign interest in the upcoming social season while Lucky sailed to China to make their first tea run now that he and Ian were officially in business. She smiled and wished him well, all the while wishing she were with them.

Well, the balls, musicales, dinner parties, morning calls, and rides through Hyde Park would still be there when she returned. She was

not going to sit in her room and cry as he sailed away. Not this time. This was the chance of a lifetime—and she wasn't letting it pass her by.

By tomorrow night, she would feel the salty spray of the ocean on her face and the motion of the vessel under her feet. For some inexplicable reason she just knew her heart would soar as she heard the snapping of the sailcloth in the wind and the shouts of the men as they performed the tasks ordered by their captain. It would be just as Ren described when he told her of the adventures he had when she was a babe. Sarah smiled as she remembered forcing her brother to repeat each voyage every evening he was home.

When she was older, she read the journals and ship logs that lined the shelves of her brother's office, finding these far more stimulating reading than the historical or scientific tomes or romantic novels in the library. These were log books with descriptions written in the hand of her relatives, who had seen and witnessed each act and event she'd read.

It was those tales of adventure, and the uncertainty of success that started this desire within her to travel and see the world. They were food to her adventurer's mind and soul.

Yes, without a doubt, Lucky would be angry with her when he discovered she'd stowed away, but he'd soon get over his anger when he realized he couldn't very well return her to dry land. Her older brother would be furious as well once he realized what she'd done. But by the time anyone noticed her missing, she'd already be somewhere in the Atlantic and there'd be nothing they could do about it. She'd write a note to Ren explaining what she'd done and leave it on the *secrétaire*. They'd find it when they looked through her room for clues, though they should know she'd seize the opportunity to sail the Atlantic and see New York City when it presented itself. After all, she talked about her desire to see the Americas her entire life.

The devil take her, but she'd happily face Ren's anger upon her return for an adventure such as this!

A soft knock on her door preceded her maid, who'd come to help her undress for bed. While Trudy braided her thick mass of unruly waves, Sarah contemplated the timing of her escape. She had to leave well before breakfast and do so without setting up an alarm. Darkness was her ally. With the mound of pillows on the bed, she would fashion a suitable form under the covers that hopefully upon first glance would appear human, thus intimating to her maid she still slept. Then once at the docks, she'd need someone to take her out to the boat. That was why she'd thrown her coin purse in the satchel. She didn't doubt that she'd find someone to take her. In her experience, when you offered someone enough coin, they'd willingly do just about

anything.

Like the summer she was ten years old, when she mapped the entire estate over a period of five weeks while the rest of the family enjoyed their season in London. She had been studying geography at the time and Ren had joked about her mapping the American continents one too many times. Sarah had wanted to prove her map drawing skill to her brother and set out alone to accomplish the task.

Of course she was found out before she'd gone one hundred yards from the stables. Theo the stable lad had discovered what she was up to as she led her pony, loaded with all her supplies, plus a rolled napkin with some pilfered crusty bread and fruit. At first, he refused to keep quiet about her expedition. Until she offered him her collection of Roman coins she'd dug up near the old church ruins.

On her brother's birthday, she proudly presented him with a rolled, charted map of Haldenwood, current up to that date, with boundaries and elevation changes. When asked how she'd accomplished the task, she proudly regaled to the entire family of her solo adventures in mapping.

Sarah waited until her maid had gone, then opened the drawer to her desk and took out a sheet of vellum, quill and ink.

My dearest family,

First, please do not be upset. Rest assured, I am safe with Lucky. And please, for pity's sake, do NOT interrupt the race because of my desire to not have another adventure pass me by!

I have decided that since it is highly doubtful that I shall ever marry, there are a few things I would like to do before I settle into my spinsterhood. One is seeing if the ocean really is as clear and blue as I've always heard; and another is to see America.

Also, please do not fault Lucky in this. He knew nothing of my plans.

Love, and etc.,

*Your Sister,
Sarah*

With the note written, she placed it inside the old ship's journal she'd been reading. The only thing she waited for now was for the house to go quiet for the night.

Slipping past the fire boy as he slept in the kitchen proved easier

than she'd expected and once outside she made her way to the street, keeping to the shadows alongside the house as much as possible. She walked briskly and with intent toward the port a short distance away. She entered the area cordoned off for the morning ceremonies and began to look for someone to ferry her out to *Avenger*. Pulling the gray coarse-knit cap down lower over her brow, she took on a stooped posture and with the bag slung over her shoulder she looked very much like any other young sailor. She raised the collar of her coat, hiding her face and any trace of the waist-length braid tucked inside.

A scrawny lad sat with his feet dangling over the side of the dock. Glancing over the edge, she saw a dinghy tied below. Sarah dropped her voice, hoping she sounded masculine. "Can ye ferry me out to me boat, lad? I shoulda been on it hours ago and th' cap'n will be missin' me come sun-up."

The lad shook his head. "Can't do it. I'm waitin' on me own cap'n."

"There'll be coin in it for ye."

The boy looked more interested now that money was mentioned. "Ow much ye got?"

Sarah fished two half sovereigns from her pocket and showed him. The boy looked at the money in her hand, then around the darkened pier.

"Fine. But I gotta be quick, don't know when me cap'n's comin' back." Sarah tossed the bag into the dinghy and stepped down into it. Once the boy shoved away from the pier with the oar, he asked, "Which un's yer boat?"

"*Avenger*."

"Aye. I knows where it is."

They rowed out about a hundred yards into the darkness with only the light of a cloud-covered sliver of moon. Gentle waves lapped the side of the tiny craft.

This was it. There was no turning back now. She was on her way to see the ocean and America. Well, at least one city in America. She told herself that she would return later to see more of the country later. Perhaps once she found a traveling companion.

She practically trembled with anticipation when the lad brought the dinghy along-side Lucky's boat, near the rope ladder. Sarah asked, "Are ye sure ye got the right boat? Don't want me cap'n lashin' me back."

"Aye, she's the right un. I'm right alongside ye on *Evangeline*."

She handed the lad the two coins, tossed her satchel over her shoulder, and grabbed hold of Jacob's ladder.

"Good luck to ye."

"Aye. And to you too," she replied as she began to climb up the

port side.

She peered over the rail and saw no one about. Silently climbing onto the deck, Sarah wound her way toward the bow and prayed the hatch to the forward hold would be open. If so, she'd climb down and hide there. If it wasn't, she knew she couldn't lift it easily or quietly. In that case, she'd have to find the lazarette, or dry goods storeroom if there was one, and hide there.

Seeing the open hatch, she thanked God and knelt to look inside. It was dark out and even darker below in the hold. She'd just have to take her chances. She lowered her bag in and dropped it. It didn't make a sound so she assumed her landing, too, would be soft and silent. She sat in front of the hold, grabbing the lip of the hatch opposite and scooted her bottom forward, then dropped herself feet first into the abyss.

As she'd suspected, she landed on folded canvas duck cloth. Yards and yards of the stuff. Spare sails, she thought. Wonderful. Moving to the far corner of the cavernous dark hold, she lay on the folded material and using her satchel as a pillow, forced her racing heart to calm and tried to sleep.

Grayish-pink light filtered into the forward hold from overhead. Day was breaking. Footsteps alerted her to at least one crewman awake above deck. The man drew closer to the bow, and her hideout. Sarah quickly lifted a fold of sailcloth and ducked under it, then remembered her bag and covered herself and it thoroughly. The hatch overhead slammed shut, echoing in the hold and reverberating through her body. Trapped. Truly shut-in. The time to cry off, if she were going to do such a thing was now past.

She threw the stifling sail off her and thought about the adventure ahead. Soon, the race would be underway and Lucky wouldn't be able to send her ashore. That's when she would come out of hiding. There was no way she'd spend the entire voyage down here. She wanted to see the ocean teeming with fishes, feel the salty wind and sea spray as it whipped over her face and through her hair. She wanted to see no land, because she'd never sailed anywhere before where you couldn't see or swim to land nearby. She wanted to experience that sense of vulnerability that comes with being at the complete mercy of a force greater than any she'd ever known—that supreme force of nature described by her relatives and the other captains of whom she'd read. They were the same men who established trade with countries around the globe, men whose bravery and skills brought almost every boat and man home.

The darkened hold became stifling, the smell of pitch stronger now that no air entered from the hatchway. Removing her coat, she

tossed it to the side along with her hat and satchel. Sounds coming from above told her the crew was weighing anchor. The boat began to move, now free from its mooring. Sails were raised and the vessel surged forward. The boat pitched hard to port as it turned and Sarah was thrown into the bulkhead, striking her shoulder on a beam. Thinking of a way to keep from getting tossed about while she was down here, she resigned herself to lying close to the center of the hold, under several folds of sail, even though it was more than a bit warm. The additional weight kept her relatively padded and safe.

She tried to get situated once again and settled in with the comforting rocking and rolling motion of a ship at full sail. Smiling in the inky blackness, she wondered if her maid had noticed her gone yet and if her brother had found her letter.

He was sure to be angry, but hopefully not so angry that he'd delay the start of the race to search Lucky's boat and haul her back home.

No, he wouldn't do that. That would cause a scandal. And if there was one thing the Duke of Caversham detested more than lying, it was the mere thought of the family name tangled up in a scandal.

Sarah knew the precise moment they'd hit the open sea. The boat began to pitch unlike anything she'd ever known before. Of course it didn't help being in the farthest front compartment as the bow sliced through the waves. Perhaps that was why people didn't sleep in the bow, and only sails were stored up here. Sails couldn't get beat up, like stupid, impulsive ladies who don't think before they get themselves locked in the forward hold.

Thankfully the sailcloth provided her some protection, but she still got tossed about the small compartment. Once she'd even hit the solid oak rafter of the deck above her. Sarah heard a voice issue orders above, and the scurry of footsteps as the command was carried out.

This went on for quite a while, as Sarah contemplated banging on the hatch to have someone let her out. She was thirsty and hungry, and needed to relieve herself. She had no idea how long she'd been down here, nor how far out of Liverpool they were. Another pitch and she felt weightless again, and braced herself for another hit against the rafter.

This was insane. She wanted adventure, not broken bones. When the boat turned hard over, Sarah flew into the right bulkhead. She vowed that the minute she heard footsteps above deck she would scream for the man to let her out. Having no idea how long the seas were going to be rough, or when anyone might open the hatch so she could get some fresh air, she decided she just could not wait any longer. Oh, what was she thinking? No one even knew she was down

here. It was then she realized spare sails don't need fresh air, just protection from water.

It seemed an eternity before she heard voices and footsteps headed toward the bow. But as soon as she did, she let out with the loudest, longest scream she could muster.

Ian stood at the wheel, with his eye on the fore-and-aft sail and foresail. Scanning the horizon once again, he caught sight of *Avenger* and knew she followed his lead. He had approximately a six minute lead out of the box, which meant nearly a mile separated the two vessels. Ahead were three square-rigged vessels at full sail and the *Ann McKim*. By luck of the draw, nineteen of the thirty-two boats entered left the box before him. Ian allowed himself a smile of satisfaction as he realized all that stood between him and the lead were the four vessels ahead. Especially since the *Revenge* was a three masted topsail schooner, which at first glance didn't look nearly as fast as *Ann McKim*, with her long jibboom and four headsails. But was, in fact, much quicker.

He knew a race such as this wasn't won on the number of sails or masts. A skilled captain was essential, but what some sailors tended to overlook was the one thing Ian considered most important. The hull and keel. And these had been retrofitted specifically to his design. If he was right, and he won, then his entire fleet of schooners would be designed the same.

As he set a course to the next coordinate, Ian pondered the things he could do with that winning purse. During his musings, one of the crew shouted something to him from the bow. Looking out at the flying jib, and seeing nothing awry, he motioned for the man to speak up.

"There's a lad stowed away in the sail locker!"

Ian handed the wheel over to his second, and strode the ninety odd feet to the hatch in the bow.

"Did I hear you correctly? You said there was a stow-away?"

"Right, Cap'n, sir. He's a hollerin' up a storm down there."

"Are you sure you heard correctly?" Ian asked as he held onto the brass railing. Just then he heard it too, a voice, bellowing from below.

"Get him out of there and lock him up. We'll turn him in when we return. He gets minimal ration, too. I'm not feeding some little whelp a full three squares if he's broken the law and stowed away."

"Aye-aye cap'n," the man said as Ian turned back to his post at the wheel.

A few minutes later, the crewman shoved a scrawny kid in front of him. His oil cloth slicker, two sizes too big was buttoned to the chin, and the knitted cap covered his head. "Cap'n, sir, he says he's

your brother.”

“I don’t have a brother,” Ian said without needing to look down at the scamp. “Lock him up in the lazarette. I’ll deal with him later.”

“Where’s Lucky?” the definitely female voice squeaked with fear.

Just then Ian looked down into the deepest amber brown eyes he’d seen only once before. He didn’t need to see the color of her hair, or the slender feminine form that plagued his dreams the night before to know who it was. “Holy Mother of God,” he swore, unable to take his gaze from hers. “What have you done?”

“Obviously stowed away onto the wrong boat.”

≈ ≈ ≈

Loving Sarah coming Summer 2013.

Sign up for Sandy’s mailing list to be the first to learn about her new releases.

www.sandyraven.com/connect

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Raven has a husband who spoils her rotten, and kids that are just a hair's breadth away from perfect. She's addicted to House Hunter's International and has *never* missed an episode, though she acknowledges that she could never live in most of those countries because the houses are just too small. She is also addicted to Starbucks' Chai Latte, and never passes up an opportunity to have one.

Sandy grew up on the Texas Gulf Coast with sand between her toes and perpetually frizzy hair. Which is why she now lives in the middle-of-nowhere Virginia, in a place with minimal to moderate humidity (for perfect, non-frizzy curls,) rolling hills and farmed forests. The only downside to that is the temperamental satellite internet and the closest Starbucks being a thirty minute drive away.

Home is a renovated old farm house she shares with her hero husband, in the foothills of Blue Ridge Mountains, where she's owned by more cats, dogs and horses than she cares to admit to. She's a long-time member of RWA, and is a member of VRW and the Beau Monde. Second to writing is her love for her horses. She practices natural horsemanship, and loves to ride her barefoot Tennessee Walkers on the trails and in the woods around her home.

You can visit her at

Website:

www.SandyRaven.com

On Facebook:

www.facebook.com/SandyRavenAuthor

Table of Contents

Title Page	
Copyright	
A Note to Readers	
Dedication	
Acknowledgments	
Chapter One	
Chapter Two	
Chapter Three	
Chapter Four	
Chapter Five	
Chapter Six	
Chapter Seven	
Chapter Eight	
Chapter Nine	
Chapter Ten	
Chapter Eleven	
Chapter Twelve	
Chapter Thirteen	
Chapter Fourteen	
Chapter Fifteen	
Chapter Sixteen	
Chapter Seventeen	
Chapter Eighteen	
Chapter Nineteen	
Chapter Twenty	
Chapter Twenty-One	
Epilogue	
Author's Note	
Excerpt from Already His	
Excerpt from Loving Sarah	
About the Author	